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Why Special Teams
Are Suddenly the
NFL's Funnest Phase

BY CONOR ORR



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COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY KYLE ROSS/
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athlete

has a

story

to tell.

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SCORECARD

ESSAY

No Longer On Thin Ice

*SEVERAL WOMEN'S HOCKEY LEAGUES
HAVE LAUNCHED (AND FAILED), BUT
THE PWHL LOOKS POISED TO THRIVE*

► BY KRISTEN NELSON

W

HEN KELLY PANNEK

got a call in September 2023 to join PWHL Minnesota, everything was finally falling into place.

The launch of the Professional Women's Hockey League had been announced just a few days earlier, and the first puck was set to drop in four months. There were six franchises (Minnesota, Boston, Montreal, New York, Ottawa and Toronto) but no team nicknames. No other players had signed on yet. Minnesota didn't even have a coach. But Pannek did not hesitate to become the first player to officially ink a contract with the

MICHAEL CHISHOLM/BETTY IMAGES

league. This is what she and hundreds of other women's hockey players had been working toward for years. "It felt like a no-brainer," Pannek says. "Minnesota's been a huge part of my life. It's where I'm from, and it's where I've grown up. Then to continue my professional career in Minnesota—that's something I never was able to dream of."

When Pannek graduated from the University of Minnesota in



CROWD PLEASERS

Stars like Pannek (opposite) have hockey fans across two countries turning out in record numbers.

2019, becoming a pro wasn't a given. At that time the Canadian Women's Hockey League (CWHL) had just folded. There was the National Women's Hockey League (NWHL), but more than 200 players were boycotting it because they weren't earning livable wages. Instead, players created the Professional Women's Hockey Players' Association (PWHPA), which played exhibition games

to garner support for establishing a united and sustainable North American league.

After four years of sacrificing their pro careers, there was finally a league that checked all the boxes for Pannek and her peers thanks to a hefty financial commitment from Dodgers owner Mark Walter, the counsel of Billie Jean King and an eight-year collective bargaining agreement the players worked on. It wasn't easy to get the league off the ground in a matter of months. But now heading into its third season—with team names given to those original six franchises; sell-out crowds showing up across the U.S. and Canada; and expansion teams set to join in Seattle and Vancouver—the PWHL has swiftly established that there is an appetite for professional women's hockey.

"We tend to do things quickly around here," says Jayna Hefford, the PWHL's executive vice president of hockey operations. But what is being accomplished at a rapid pace is something many had spent years—or even decades—preparing for.

Hefford was one of the lucky ones. During her playing days in the mid-1990s and 2000s, she didn't have to have a day job. She coached at camps, did some speaking events and had a few endorsements. She was one of the few true professionals in the sport. "The majority of my teammates were teachers or lawyers or whatever else during the day," Hefford says.

The first league to actually pay its players salaries was the second iteration of the NWHL. When it was founded in 2015, players were paid from \$10,000 to \$26,000 a season. But that didn't last long, with player wages getting cut up to 50% in the league's second year. After the CWHL shuttered, the NWHL was the only pro option

left on the continent. The game's top players decided there was too much bad blood to continue, with mistrust around everything from laughable salaries to having to pay for their own travel to facilities that didn't have ... adequate facilities. Players didn't always have access to a locker room or bathroom during practice and thus had to relieve themselves in a trash can. "You're playing in a glorified beer league," U.S. Olympian Hilary Knight said in 2020.

Hefford, who was interim commissioner of the CWHL in its final season, was asked to join the PWHPA as an operations consultant. Players initially hoped their boycott of the NWHL would last just a year. But it wasn't until the PWHPA joined forces with Walter and King in 2022 and officially unionized in '23 that they were finally able to make meaningful progress. "We committed all along that this was going to be a player-first league," Hefford says. "That collaboration between the players' union and the league is unlike any other league."

A 62-page CBA was signed in July 2023, setting minimum salaries at \$35,000 and requiring teams to pay at least six players \$80,000 for the first season. And then things moved *quickly*. The league was officially announced that August with players signing contracts in September. Training camps started in November and the first puck dropped on New Year's Day '24. On Day 1, there were 2,537 fans watching at a sold-out Mattamy Athletic Centre for Toronto vs. New York with 2.9 million viewers watched on TV in Canada alone. On Day 2, Ottawa set a pro women's hockey attendance record of 8,318 at TD Place. On Day 6, Minnesota set a new one with 13,316 at Xcel Energy Center.

They took things on the road with neutral-site games in Pittsburgh and Detroit, where *another* attendance record was set.

Year 2 was much of the same, as teams like Montreal and Toronto moved to larger venues and the league had nine neutral-site games to reach new fans. This past off-season, Emily Clark signed a record-setting contract with the Ottawa Charge, joining eight other players to reportedly be making six figures. PWHL executive vice president of business operations Amy Scheer told the Associated Press earlier this year that the league's sponsorships had grown by 50% and merchandise sales had doubled.

This wasn't just a novelty. And it certainly didn't hurt that the league hit the ice smack dab in the middle of a women's sports movement, with more eyes on the WNBA and NWSL than ever before.

"I think you have to pay attention to it," Pannek says. "I think it's really exciting to add to it with the

PWHL, right? What's really cool is that those leagues are 10, 20 years ahead of us and we're still keeping pace with some of the norms in the workplace and professionalism in women's sports. To be able to kind of see the parallels and see the differences and also see where, *O.K., that's where they got in 10, 20 years. Where can we get in 10 or 20 years?*"

Already in the first phase of expansion, the PWHL is cruising past its own expectations. Seattle and Vancouver—both of which will carry the tradition of

not having team names in their first seasons—are adding a new time zone to the league. There is talk of adding more franchises in the near future, though Hefford says the league first wants to see how the new additions fare in the first half of this season.

It's not lost on Hefford how different this is from not just her playing days—when it was mostly friends in family in the stands and practices were held at 9 p.m., after work—but also from her initial days as an executive.

“WE’RE GOING TO LOOK
DIFFERENT IN A COUPLE
OF YEARS,” SAYS HEFFORD.





PATH FORWARD

The work of King and Hefford (opposite, with pucks) has opened doors for O'Brien (in red).

"When I was with the CWHL, we had five people working for the league, and that was an international league that had teams in Canada, the U.S. and China at the time," Hefford says. "You look at where we are, and it's just amazing. You really understand the importance of the investment that needs to be made to get this off the ground."

"The players have a CBA, they have some certainty, they understand what they will get in return, and they understand what they need to provide. As a league, just the growth of having a marketing department, having an officiating department, having groups of people that every day focus on growing the league, it's just a really exciting time. We know there's so much growth ahead and we're going to look different in a couple of years than we look right now."

Not every team has been an

instant success, though. Playing in Bridgeport, Conn., Elmont, N.Y., and Newark, the New York franchise has twice finished at the bottom of the attendance standings.

New York was always going to be a tough sports market to break into, Hefford admits. There were 13 major pro teams in the metropolitan area before the Sirens came to town. Building a successful new franchise takes time with grassroots efforts at local kids' camps and finding other ways to reach fans who don't automatically gravitate toward hockey, like they do in Canadian markets.

"[New York has] obviously struggled, but I see that as more of an opportunity rather than a setback," says Casey O'Brien, who was drafted third out of Wisconsin by the Sirens in June. She grew up in New York City and remembers going to Liberty games at Madison Square Garden when the team averaged 10,000 fans. The center is hoping her new team can find a way to reach that level: "We can definitely follow in their footsteps."

As the league grows, Hefford says there's still a focus on making sure original franchises, like the Sirens, improve their vitality. "Our

job is to maintain the competitive balance," Hefford says. "I think it's one of our greatest strengths."

To keep the on-ice product entertaining, the PWHL has deviated from what women's hockey has looked like in the past. The league allows a hybrid bodycheck, which is more physical than what fans might be used to seeing at the collegiate level. It has also implemented the "jailbreak" rule, which allows a player to be freed from the penalty box when their team scores shorthanded.

As the league grows—expansion has added 46 roster spots and 30 more games—Hefford says it's going to be hard to predict what happens in Year 3. But Pannek, whose Minnesota Frost won the first two PWHL titles, has big expectations for this season, which begins Nov. 21.

So what can fans look for? "More chaos," Pannek says. "I feel like our league just has some chaotic moments in games, which is so fun. I also feel like there'll be some rivalries maybe this year that start to develop with more teams."

Chaos, after all, is how the PWHL started, and it seems to be working so far. □



SCORECARD: GAMEPLAN

GLOBAL GOLF

A FLEDGLING SENIORS COMPETITION COULD CAPITALIZE ON FANS' RYDER CUP HANGOVERS

► BY JEFF RITTER

GOLF FANS still buzzing about (or perhaps, sobering up from) the recent Ryder Cup at Bethpage Black can take heart. There's yet another innovative, international match-play golf competition on tap before the year ends: the World Champions Cup.

The second iteration of the event, which will be held from Dec. 4–7 in Clearwater, Fla., and air on ESPN and ABC, will feature players from golf's 50-and-over set. The field includes several Hall of Famers and major winners, including Justin Leonard, who helped usher in the era of the overly boisterous



BUBBLING OVER

The U.S. team, including Ryder Cup vet Leonard (above), celebrated a win in the inaugural WCC in 2023.

celebration when he clinched the 1999 Ryder Cup for the U.S. with a 45-foot putt that led to bedlam on the green and in the stands.

Unlike the Ryder Cup's setup with the U.S. and Europe going head-to-head, the World Champions Cup features three teams (the U.S., Europe and the rest of the world) playing simultaneously. Also, each team's captain will tee up and earn points alongside their squads.

Here's how it works: Two days of team sessions will include a little-used but delightfully named format called Scottish sixsomes, where players will compete in two-man teams, with each golfer teeing off and then selecting one ball to play as alternate shots for the rest of the hole. There will also be sessions of six-ball, in which each member of a two-man team plays his own ball from start to finish. The final day features a series of traditional singles matches, played in threesomes.

"It gives us a chance to be a team again," says U.S. captain Jim Furyk. And for snowbirds, it's a chance to show those New York fans how it's done. □

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SCORECARD: FULL FRAME

CLASS ACT

PHOTOGRAPH BY LANE STEWART

B **ING PHOTOGRAPHED** for SI's NBA Preview Issue in 1981 took the Los Angeles Lakers 35 minutes. Setting up the shoot, on the other hand, took Lane Stewart the better part of a week.

The theme of the story was "back to school," so it made sense to picture the six players and coach Paul Westhead in a vintage classroom. The problem was there

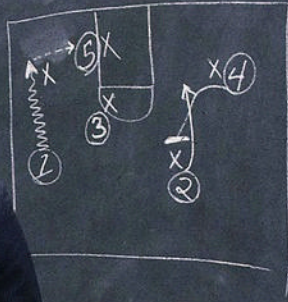
wasn't a school near the team's facility, so Stewart built one from scratch in a hotel conference room, a process that took six days. Being near Hollywood, he was able to rent things like portraits of presidents, a radiator and a light switch. But things like the desks, door and globe took a little more time to source. Then there was the matter of the floor, walls and blackboards, all of

which Stewart constructed. After painting the walls a dingy white and scattering some chalk dust, he was just about ready. The final touches were the apples, which Stewart waited to purchase until the morning of the shoot so they'd remain, as he said, "the brightest red apples I could find."

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SCORECARD: HISTORY

GOLDEN TOUGH

IN A DIFFERENT ERA, THE WARRIORS HAD AN OWNER OF A VERY DIFFERENT STRIPE

► BY L. JON WERTHEIM

PERCHED REGALLY in the Mission Bay district of San Francisco, the Chase Center is, yes, the home of the NBA's Warriors and the WNBA's Valkyries, but it doubles as a monument to today's Sports Industrial Complex. Part of a waterfront development district, the arena sits nestled among Uber's headquarters, coffee shops that sell cappuccinos by the tankard, and Oracle Park (b. 2000)—home of the San Francisco Giants—which, by comparison, seems downright old-timey.

Sponsored by one of the world's largest banks and opened in 2019, the Chase Center is a basketball pleasure dome, featuring

\$2-million-per-season bunker suites, replete with wine cellars. For the common fans, there's local fare like Bakesale Betty's fried chicken sandwiches and pork al pastor tacos from Backyard Burritos for sale on the concourse. Parking is sparse, but there is a bicycle valet, this being San Francisco and all. Stand on the plaza and you'll enjoy a view of the Northern California terrain. Look eastward and—almost an act of trolling—you'll see Oakland, the team's previous home.

The building is nicknamed "the House that Steph Built," but its main attraction, Steph Curry, is less a sports star than a global celebrity. He also has a reported

nine-figure net worth, boosted by his \$60 million annual playing salary. Golden State has won four NBA titles in the last decade (though "only" one has come during the team's six seasons at the Chase Center). This is a franchise that last sold for \$450 million. That was in 2010. It is now valued at around \$9 billion.

No one would have loved this transformation more than the Warriors' first Bay Area owner, Franklin Mieuli. So many of his ideas and ideals, considered fanciful at the time, have come to fruition. A team not merely representing a city, but standing as a civic treasure, creating jobs, leaking revenue like beads of sweat.



RON NIESTER/AP

Broadcast technology that enables the Warriors to attract fans well beyond the Golden State, never mind the Bay Area. An authoritative but compassionate coach. All at a time when sports have grown into their own financial sector—no longer a diversion so trivial that its section of the *San Francisco Chronicle* needs its own unserious color. Mieuli would take in the entire tableau and not merely smile approvingly, but then also laugh his familiar laugh.

But that's all largely speculative, because it presupposes Mieuli could actually be found.

HERE WAS an owner who now seems as much a relic as the 6'8" center or NBA players working in sporting goods stores in the off-season to supplement their income. Today, slick, credentialed hedge fund titans or venture capitalists—to wit: the Warriors' Joe Lacob—own teams (and now need help from private equity to make the purchase). In the '60s, '70s and up through the mid-'80s, the Warriors were owned by a man who was the son of a San Jose gardener, often slept on a houseboat and cared as much about good vibes as balance sheets, running the team not as a CFO, but as an F-A-N.

Inasmuch as a measure of celebrity came with owning the local sports team, none of it went to Mieuli's head. Perhaps that's because that head was usually shrouded in a Sherlock Holmes-esque deerstalker cap. His headwear, invariably, set off his substantial beard and the Hawaiian shirt he favored, unbuttoned to the point that a carpet of chest hair poked out. His favorite mode of transportation was a motorcycle, though he often forgot where he'd parked it, leaving him to return to restaurants days later to retrieve

his ride. As he once put it to the *Chronicle*, "I had too many motorcycles and too short a memory."

Mieuli had great presence, but also great *absence*, a man known for his sporadic disappearances. When the urge struck or his stress levels rose, he would hide out at home, or bike to Mexico, or hike Yosemite. For days, even calls from his loyal assistants would go unanswered. When *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* writer Frank Deford once asked Mieuli where he would go during his walkabouts, the owner was coy: "I'm very judicious about my hiding. I'll hide somewhere where I also have some business to take care of. I'm not going all the way to Chicago just to hide."

But then, when pressed, he gave a specific example of a choice hiding spot: "Well, all right, I'll tell you one place, because I haven't gone there recently. This place I used to go to a lot was down in Santa Cruz. I'd visit some Italian fishermen up there, the Carniglia boys, and work with them. I'd put on the outfits, the rubber boots and all. It was very unlikely that anyone would think of looking for Franklin working with the Carniglia boys."

Leave it to Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis—he of the black leather jackets, the slick hair, the enemies list—to traffic in grievances and offer the "Just win, baby" vocabulary of war. Leave it to the Oakland A's owner, Charlie Finley, to berate his employees, throw around nickels as if they were man-hole covers, and threaten to move the team. Their fellow Bay Area sports owner would be seeking refuge with the Carniglia boys, rubber boots and all.

Was Mieuli known to wear a fake mustache and sideburns for kicks? Was he on a first-name

basis with the staff of every Italian restaurant in North Beach? Did Mieuli, more generally, cut a wildly idiosyncratic profile? Yes. Yes, he did. Even his current Wikipedia bio describes him thusly: "An eccentric personality, Mieuli eschewed formal attire and conservative grooming in favor of a casual wardrobe and his ever-present full beard and deerstalker."

But that undersells his influence. Mieuli may have been one of the more offbeat owners in pro sports—which, of course, is saying something. But, burnished by time, he also takes his rightful place as one of the most important.

BY HIS own admission, Mieuli was kissed by the sports gods. He stopped growing well south of six feet. He often battled his

STALKING SUCCESS

Mieuli (opposite) drafted Barry (below), who would leave for the ABA but return to lead the Warriors to the 1975 NBA title.



weight. He struggled to throw a tight spiral. But his timing was exquisite. Mieuli (MEW-lee) was born in San Jose in 1920, the son of Italian immigrants. His father, Giacomo, eventually ran a sprawling nursery. As a kid, Mieuli would make the 50-mile jaunt north from the South Bay to San Francisco. There awaited a wonderland of bridges, fog and tall buildings that seemed to literally scrape the sky...so exotic, Mieuli called it "The City"—a shorthand he would later use to market his team.

After attending the University of Oregon and serving in the Navy during World War II, he got a job working in the ad department for San Francisco's Burgermeister Brewery. There, he helped arrange

the marriage between beer and sports. "Of course it was luck," he told SI. "Everyone credited me for my clairvoyance at first. I didn't know anything."

Luck is hardly a strong enough term for what came next. Mieuli happened upon a newspaper item about the San Francisco 49ers possibly being up for sale. As it turned out, the account was erroneous, but Mieuli followed up and landed a meeting with the team's owner, Tony Morabito. They discussed Burgermeister sponsoring 49ers games on the fast-growing new medium of television. Mieuli seized on the idea to produce the games himself starting in 1954. He left the brewery, started a production company, got in good with the

team and, a few years later, the 49ers offered him a 10% share in the franchise, for \$60,000.

In 1962, Mieuli led an investor group that rustled up \$850,000 to move the Philadelphia Warriors to San Francisco. Using his equity in the 49ers as collateral, he then obtained a controlling interest in the team a year later. After the baseball Giants left New York and headed to San Francisco in

HAVING A BALL

Mieuli, opposite with (from left) Nick Jones, Vic Bartolome and Jim Barnett, shared the hoops fun with fans and players alike.

WALTER IOOSS JR.



1958, Mieuli began producing their games. He'd travel with the team, go drinking with the managers, coaches and broadcasters, hold down the piano bar and then suddenly...disappear. Chub Feeney—a Giants executive who would later become National League president—nicknamed Mieuli “The Phantom.” Mieuli shrugged. “It’s too much trouble,” he once said, “to say good night.”

After one of the Giants owners, Joan Payson, opposed the team’s relocation, Mieuli was happy to buy her shares and invest in baseball as well. Oh, and at the 1960 Winter Olympics in Squaw Valley, Mieuli produced the English language radio broadcasts.

As Deford put it, “Suddenly this

and quadrupled) down, routinely buying out fellow investors who couldn’t stomach the losses.

Mieuli was a firm believer in the gospel of hoops. He could frequently be seen taking shots at a basket he had installed outside the Warriors’ modest offices. He believed that basketball translated beautifully to television. He also understood the power—both financial and communal—of the sports venue, though he had a hard time finding a decent home for his franchise in San Francisco.

In the ’60s, the Warriors toggled between the dowdy Civic Auditorium and the Cow Palace, a glorified barn in Daly City—more “cow” than “palace”—where, as the name implies, the stench of



MIEULI CARED ABOUT GOOD VIBES, RUNNING THE TEAM NOT AS A CFO, BUT AS AN F-A-N.

wacky florist from San Jose was the only guy in San Francisco who owned part of every team in town—and also had a virtual monopoly on all the sports TV and radio production that came out of the Bay Area.”

Still, the Warriors were his true love. Though Wilt Chamberlain—then the preeminent basketball player on the planet—was on the team, the Warriors struggled to draw fans and hemorrhaged money. Mieuli doubled (and tripled

livestock hung thick in the air. For five seasons, the Warriors wore jerseys embroidered with the words THE CITY, a nod to Mieuli’s boyhood awe of San Francisco. But without a proper venue, the Warriors filled dates in such places as Bakersfield, Fresno, Las Vegas, Oakland, Richmond, Sacramento, San Diego and San Jose.

In January 1965, Mieuli traded Wilt back to Philadelphia’s new team, the 76ers, reasoning that San Francisco was an

underdog town and a Leviathan like Chamberlain didn’t fit the culture. Instead, he drafted slick-shooting Rick Barry. During the 1966–67 season, the Warriors lost money but won games, advancing to the NBA Finals before losing to...Chamberlain and the Sixers. They then lost Barry, who intentionally sat out the next season to exhaust his contract and then jump to the ABA’s Oakland Oaks.

The more Mieuli was advised to sell the team and let it leave town, the more committed he became to make pro basketball work in the Bay Area. Murray Olderman of the *San Francisco Examiner* once wrote, “It would be easy to toss off Franklin, because of his dress and casual lifestyle, as a buffoon. He is a smart guy who hung on in professional basketball, because he is convinced that it, like everything else he has touched in his life, will ultimately make him a bundle.”

But Mieuli had social, as well as financial, goals. In the days



“MAYBE SOMEDAY,” MIEULI SAID,
“I’LL PICK UP A NEWSPAPER
AND SEE WHAT A GENIUS I AM.”

when the NBA was widely considered “too Black,” he encouraged the front office to sign Black players. Ten of the 12 players on the Golden State’s 1975 title team were Black. So was the coach, Al Attles, a former Warriors player who was one of the first Black full-time coaches in professional basketball.

In 1969, at the owner’s behest, the Warriors drafted a woman, Denise Long. It was a publicity stunt—it was also against NBA rules—but Mieuli had ambitions of creating a women’s professional basketball league. Former Warriors center George Johnson put it this way: “When you see [Franklin] and have not met him, you say, ‘He’s sort of strange.’ But once you get to know him, you change your mind.”

In 1971, Mieuli made Oakland the team’s primary home,

changing the name to the *Golden State Warriors*—a hedge if he had to continue staging games in other California markets like San Diego and San Jose. The following season, he re-signed Barry. During the 1974–75 season, the Warriors drew modestly (8,800 a night on average in a building that held 13,000) but won liberally. With Barry averaging more than 30 points a game, the Warriors got better with each round of the play-offs and suddenly became NBA champions. When his team swept the Washington Bullets in four games and claimed the trophy, Mieuli described the experience as “a delightful haze of animation.”

Even that triumphant post-season offered both a glimpse of Mieuli’s venue challenges and a bit of foreshadowing. The Warriors were such underdogs that season that the Oakland Coliseum had

booked the Ice Follies for mid-May. When the Warriors reached the Finals, they had to move their games—to that point, the most critical games in franchise history—back across the Bay, to the Cow Palace. When the Warriors returned from Washington after the Finals sweep, engine troubles forced the flight to land prematurely in Oakland and the players took cabs to San Francisco, where crowds awaited.

Winning the title seemed only to make Mieuli *more* quirky. A great admirer of the human hand, he hung artwork of fingers and palms throughout his office and took meetings seated on a chair carved in the shape of an open palm. (The room was also adorned with hanging Italian meats, pictures of celebrities from Rudolph Valentino



FRISCO DAYS

From the Cow Palace to the A’s parking lot, Mieuli was at home throughout his beloved Bay Area.

FROM TOP: WALTER IODIS JR.; JOHN O'HARA/SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/GETTY IMAGES

to Albert Einstein, and a plaque from the wives of Warriors players which read YOUR ITALIAN TEMPERAMENT IS SURPASSED BY YOUR KINDNESS.)

More than one former colleague also recalls Mieuli firing up a doobie in his office. “There are characters in sports today, but not the same as Franklin,” recalls Andy Dolich, a former Warriors, A’s and 49ers executive. “We’d be in meetings with the Oakland mayor or the city council or the Coliseum board and Franklin was several miles away in many of the conversations.”

Not all of Mieuli’s ideas were winners. Warriors employees even kept a file labeled “Franklin’s Follies.” Foretelling the era of luxury suites, he attempted to give the Warriors’ most posh fans a “premium experience” by converting the first three rows of the Oakland Coliseum into tables adorned with china and tablecloths. (The players weren’t fans.) He also once rode his Honda motorcycle onto the polished floor of the arena—and wiped out.

Ironically, given the three-point-er’s role in the Warriors’ future success, Mieuli was adamantly opposed to the shot, filibustering at league meetings about how it was an irredeemable gimmick. “I’m not going to deny I made a lot of mistakes,” Mieuli once said. “But maybe someday I’ll pick up a newspaper and see what a genius I am.”

Meanwhile, he continued his habit of mysterious disappearances. Pete Rozelle, the former NFL commissioner, was friends with Mieuli. At least he thought he was. Rozelle told SI, “He’s always been a floater. I’d see Franklin somewhere in L.A., and we’d go out to dinner, and he’d end up staying the night and then he’d

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To receive a payment, file a claim by **May 18, 2026**.

WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?

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GETTING ON THE BOARD

Mieuli, who championed diversity, made Attles [seated, center] the NBA's first full-time Black coach.

be gone. He'd leave his socks and I would get them laundered and mail them back to him in an envelope. He still floats. You're in a group with him and all of a sudden he disappears."

By the late '70s, the Warriors were a sub-.500 team and, worse, were again struggling to draw fans. Mieuli was reluctant to raise ticket prices, for fear of reducing demand. He stuck with Attles until after the 1982–83 season, because, well, he liked the guy. He would become seduced by players like Joe Barry Carroll, drafting them despite others' misgivings. Al Davis once told Mieuli, "The trouble with you is you got a love club over there. Everybody loves everybody."

Finally, in the spring of 1986, Mieuli had had enough. The team

was losing games and money in equal measure. The Coliseum wasn't the answer to the franchise's venue challenges. So Mieuli announced his exit plan. That May, former Milwaukee Bucks owner Jim Fitzgerald and his business partner, Dan Finnane, purchased a controlling interest in the Warriors for around \$14 million, far less than the \$32.5 million owners of the Miami Heat and Charlotte Hornets would pay as an expansion fee the following season. With that, Mieuli's 24-year tenure as an NBA owner was over.

After the sale, he would still attend Warriors games. No hard feelings. (When Mieuli went MIA, sometimes his seat would be filled only by a hat placed there by a fan.) He would also show up for 49ers games. And his TV and radio

production company lived on.

Fitzgerald and Finnane owned the team for eight (largely hapless) seasons before selling to Chris Cohan for \$140 million in 1994. Cohan owned the team for 15 (largely hapless) seasons before selling to a consortium led by Lacob and Peter Guber. By then the Warriors, still confined to the Oakland Coliseum, fetched \$450 million. In the 15 years since, the franchise's value has increased twentyfold—owing largely to two of Mieuli's organizing principles: upgraded media rights and an upgraded venue.

Franklin Mieuli died in 2010 at age 89, five years before the Warriors won their first NBA title in 40 seasons and nine years before the franchise's sleek San Francisco home, the Chase Center, would be christened.

As the W's have become one of the world's preeminent sports properties, fans of a certain age know that a great debt of gratitude is owed a 5'9" man with an iffy jumper, who never did shake his propensity for deerstalkers and impetuosity. In the first line of a tribute Bruce Jenkins, a dean of Bay Area sports media, wrote in 2018, "Franklin Mieuli was delightful company and a noted eccentric, unfamiliar with formal attire and known to occasionally appear in disguise."

By then, though, Mieuli's sports foresight and the climate he helped create, was there, plain as a cloudless San Francisco day, out in the open for all to see and enjoy. □

FACES IN THE CROWD

► BY DAN FALKENHEIM

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To submit a candidate for Faces in the Crowd, email faces@si.com.



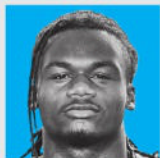
JULIANA HUTCHENS ► Sport: Softball ► Hometown: Wagoner, Okla.

Juliana, a junior infielder for Wagoner High School, led all batters in average (.800), slugging (1.600), RBIs and walks, and tied for the lead in home runs, as she helped Team USA win its fifth consecutive U-18 Women's Softball World Cup title, culminating in a 7-2 victory in the finals against Japan. An Oklahoma commit, she was named tournament MVP and is the No. 2-ranked player in the 2027 class.



JAY FRIEND ► Sport: Tennis ► Hometown: Tokyo

Friend, a senior at Arizona, defeated Ohio State's Aidan Kim 6-2, 6-4 to win the ITA Men's All-American Championship. Ranked No. 5 in the nation, he beat the fourth, seventh and ninth seeds en route to the title. Friend won three gold medals in the men's singles, mixed doubles and team events while representing Japan at the 2025 World University Games in July, and he also won his first ATP Challenger title in October.



TY CUMMINGS ► Sport: Football ► Hometown: Dublin, Ga.

Ty, a senior running back at West Laurens High, rushed for 615 yards on 19 carries in a 70-55 victory against Baldwin High, setting the state record for most yards rushing in a single game. He also scored eight touchdowns, all of which came on runs of 53 or more yards. The Georgia Southern commit rushed for 1,424 yards, averaging 14.4 yards per carry, and 18 touchdowns through his first seven games this season.

SPEEDSKATING

Ice Cold

► **WHEN BRANDON KIM** was 8, he got hooked on short-track speedskating after seeing Team USA's J.R. Celski compete in the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. Two years later, Kim watched Celski become the first skater to break 40 seconds in the 500 meters. Kim never dreamed he'd reach Celski's level, much less skate past high school.

But at the U.S. championships in September, he surpassed the three-time Olympian. Kim, now 24, broke the 500m national record (39.83) during the semifinals and won the 500m, 1000m and 1500m events. The sweep secured Kim a spot on this fall's World Tour, which

serves as the qualifier for 2026 Winter Games, and reinforced the pre-med student's decision to take this year off from Stanford and train full-time. (Before nationals, Kim hadn't raced a sub-40 500m.)

"While everyone was skating 30-40 hours a week, I was training five to seven because I had school," says the Fairfax, Va., native. "I still have a lot left in the tank."
—Sophia Vesely



KICKING

A full-page photograph of Carolina Panthers player Ryan Fitzgerald in his blue and black uniform, running on a green football field. He is wearing a black helmet with the Panthers logo and is captured in a dynamic pose, leaning forward with his right leg extended. Large white yard lines are visible on the grass. The word "KICKING" is written in large, blue, serif capital letters in the upper left corner.

by
**CONOR
ORR**

HARD TO HANDLE

Carolina's Ryan Fitzgerald has weaponized the kickoff by forcing return men to field kicks that are as unpredictable as a knuckleball.

DAVID JENSEN/GETTY IMAGES

The third phase of the game had been the NFL's forgotten forefront of a special teams revolution this season are finding an



frontier. But those at the
edge in unexpected ways



B

BACK IN MARCH, Florida State held its pro day on campus in Tallahassee. The main attractions for most talent evaluators were cornerback Azareye'h Thomas, who would be drafted in the third round by the Jets, and defensive tackle Joshua Farmer, a future Patriots fourth-rounder. But among the 18 players who worked out that day, the one who may end up having the biggest impact on the 2025 NFL season is kicker Ryan Fitzgerald—and not because, as coverage of the event noted, he nailed a 68-yard field goal in front of scouts.

After most attendees had left, Fitzgerald had an hour-long semi-private meeting with a few curious NFL team reps. Dan Orner, a private kicking coach who had been working with Fitzgerald for a few years, says scouts from the Browns and Giants asked his pupil to go through an additional battery of workouts that showcased what Orner calls the kicker's "bag of tricks." For a year, Fitzgerald and Orner had been practicing ways to "knuckleball" a kickoff, with just this moment in mind.

The importance of that conversation would become clear less than two weeks later, when NFL owners voted at their annual meeting on April 1 to tweak the touchback rule: Offenses would now get the ball at the 35-yard-line rather than the 30. (You may have missed the change at the time since everyone was screaming about the legality of the Eagles' Tush Push, which was hotly debated at the meetings.) Over the last five seasons, drives that began at the 30-yard line scored a touchdown or field goal at a rate of 37.4%. Drives that began at the 35-yard line scored at 44.8%. A touchback that put the ball at the 32 or 33 might still have made kicking the ball out of the end zone a smart play. But inside the NFL analytics

community, the consensus is that the five-yard difference equated to a statistically significant addition of expected points.

Suddenly teams were far more wary of handing an opponent a touchback, and some of them became extremely interested in alternative kickoffs that would hit the ground in the landing zone and allow the coverage team to leave its stationary position. A ball that bounced unpredictably and was difficult to field would be a significant bonus.

With all of this in mind, those curious souls in Tallahassee watched as Fitzgerald showed how he can keep his leg swing consistent but, based on the tilt of the ball, the placement of the tee or the strike point, make the ball behave in strange ways. For one of his knucklekicks Fitzgerald, a right-footed kicker, tees the ball up like a left-footed kicker would, making it look a bit curved like an end parenthesis. The higher the strike point toward the ankle and the higher the strike point on the football, the more the ball dances in the air.

The scouts asked if Fitzgerald could disguise his intentions, making a knucklekick windup and a traditional windup look identical. He could. They asked if he could keep the knuckleball action consistent from the right to the left. He could.

CAN'T TOUCHBACK THIS

Fitzgerald hit 12 of his first 13 field goal attempts, including a game-winner against the Cowboys (left), but the rookie has made the biggest impact with his unique kickoff style (below).



“They basically said, ‘Please don’t show this to anyone else,’” Orner says. “And that’s when I said to Ryan, ‘Congratulations, you just made the NFL.’”

Fitzgerald ended up signing with the Panthers as an undrafted free agent. The obscurity of his unique kicks and those of another of Orner’s clients, the Rams’ Joshua Karty, didn’t last long. Through the first seven weeks of the season, Los Angeles (26.1-yard line) and Carolina (26.2-yard line) ranked second and third in average opponent starting field position after kickoffs. (The last place team in that stat, the Jets, surrendered more than eight additional yards per drive start, resulting in a nearly 15% improvement in opponents’ scoring chance.) The sudden weaponization of the kickoff has been just one aspect of a special teams revolution this season. Through Week 7, there were 17 blocked field goals and punts, with three of them directly deciding the outcome of a game in the final seconds. More

50-plus yard field goals were being attempted per game than at any time in NFL history. More field goals of any distance were being made than ever. The number of kick returns per game quadrupled from 2024.

Seemingly overnight, an aspect of football once seen as an excellent opportunity for spectator bathroom breaks was sparking some hard questions. Should practice time be reallocated for special teams? How should kickers, punters and returners be valued? What really makes a good special teams coordinator? Should more starters be playing special teams? And, yes, should parents be buying their grade-school kickers tile brush power tool attachments so they can doctor their kicking balls like the professionals? (Too late, it’s already happening.)

John “Bones” Fassel of the Titans, one of the league’s most experienced special teams coordinators, says that, in the best possible way, his reaction has been: “What is going on?!” He and many other coaches say this season has sparked new levels of intellectual curiosity and creativity around the kicking game.

“Special teams are the wild, wild west,” Fassel says. “You just don’t know what is going to happen.”





IT IS WHERE YOU START

HOW MUCH DO KICKOFF TACTICS MATTER?

AS THESE FIGURES FROM THE 2024 NFL

SEASON SHOW, SMALL DIFFERENCES IN WHERE

AN OFFENSE BEGINS A DRIVE CAN HAVE A BIG

IMPACT ON THE LIKELIHOOD OF SCORING

DRIVE START	PCT ENDING W/TO OR FG
Own 20-24	32.8%
Own 25-29	36.8%
Own 30-34	38.0%
Own 35-39	47.2%
Own 40-44	49.4%
Own 45-49	50.6%

MARK ALBERT/CON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

POSITION OF NEED

With touchbacks becoming increasingly rare, return men like Dylan Sampson of the Browns are finding their skills in much higher demand than last season.

IN THE SPRING of 2024, three men walked onto a vacant practice field in Houston, determined to figure out what the future might look like.

Frank Ross, the Texans' special teams coordinator, is one of the league's most successful and the winner of the final two Rick Gosselin Special Teams Rankings (the legendary Dallas sportswriter, who retired the list after the 2023 season, created a 22-point grading rubric for kicking-game units that became an industry standard for rating special teams). Ross, assistant special teams coordinator Will Burnham and hybrid assistant Sean Baker stood roughly seven yards apart from one another and started experimenting with the bones of what a new dynamic kickoff might look like if it ever came to the NFL. There was nothing to work off of save for tape from the XFL, the alternative league which featured a similar kickoff.

They started working through their own theories, playing the roles of kickoff blockers or coverage men. Ross would ask Burnham if, in a certain situation, he could track him down at a certain angle. To the uninitiated, it may have looked a bit like synchronized swimming practice on dry land. Ross says it was "a bunch of 5' 10" white guys," and describes the movements on the field that day as "not explosive."

That day Ross created what he calls his "feedback loop": a hard file of a running dialogue with his players that is still in use. Because everything was created from scratch, everything was tailored to the abilities of the players at his disposal. Was any of this comfortable for them? Were the movements coaches were asking them to make feasible?

"It wasn't necessarily about X's and O's," Ross says. "What do you want your feet to look like? How do you envision yourself? This sounds silly, but do you want your butt in or out to the sideline?"

"Anytime there's a change then it's a race to who can figure it out," Burnham says. "So I'd say the first feeling was excitement because you really are throwing out a lot of years of football."

This moment reflected the true malleability of special teams from 2024 to the present day. There are raging debates over the use of larger players (tight ends, linebackers, fullbacks and defensive ends) on kickoff returns and how overall roster construction can favor or adversely impact kickoff unit personnel. Kickoff returns will evolve constantly over the next few years, coaches predict.

THE EVOLUTION extends beyond kickoffs. Take the boom in longer field goals. Kicking experts like Orner say that, outside of the fact that teams are now allowed to prepare "K-balls" throughout the week to make them more



*“Special teams [coaches are] not just a slack hire anymore,” Ross says. “It’s a factor. It matters and I think it’s going to continue to **SHAPE THE GAME.**”*



kicker-friendly instead of only on game day, the biggest change in the kicking game is that kickers are now plucked from a much more athletic pool and have become less dependent on wedge-style kicking. This method, which uses the inside of the foot, was accurate but sacrificed power. Now, according to Orner, young kickers are more likely to also be track athletes or stars in other sports. Kicks are recorded with the precision of Tiger Woods’s backswing and examined for the smallest of adjustments. Middle schoolers have personal kicking coaches. Orner also believes that college football’s mass import of kickers and punters from Australia raised the bar for American kickers who had to compete with far more natural and experimental kickers.

In the first seven weeks of this season, teams attempted 119 field goals of 50 yards or more. That number has been climbing in recent years; as recently as 2020 there were only 168 attempted *all season*. The very real possibility that someone will soon make a 70-yard field goal, the likes of which Jaguars kicker Cam Little hit in the preseason, would then seem to be the culmination of these parallel transformations.

But Ross wonders if we’re missing something.

“I’ll ask you a question,” he says over the phone just a few days before the Texans took on the Seahawks in Week 7. “Who is a better shooter, Ray Allen or Steph Curry?”

He continues: “There’s an argument for both. I probably would say Steph, but Ray Allen was at one point the all-time leading three-point shooter, right? Well, Steph necessarily isn’t a better shooter, but he changed the game because he was more confident to shoot from different spots further away. So is [Cowboys kicker] Brandon Aubrey a better kicker than [former Patriots kicker, five-time NFL scoring leader and four-time Pro Bowler] Stephen Gostkowski? Or, is Brandon Aubrey just shooting from different spots?”

Another point of division? Kick blocks. Through Week 7 the league was on pace for 30 field goal blocks. There were 18 total last year. Some NFL coordinators blame the surge on a hangover from the preseason, where teams don’t typically rush kickers aggressively and almost never rush them live in practice. Like missed tackle numbers that tend to even out once players acclimate to the physicality, blockers will be less likely to get mauled by more skilled defensive players.

However, others concede that there is a greater focus on the science behind kick blocking, just as there is on kicking itself. Fassel and the Titans had one of the most visually satisfying extra point blocks of all time in Week 2 against the Rams, when Arden Key arrived in front of kicker Karty fully in rejection mode, arms rising above his head in the shape of a diamond and swatting the ball half a field away.

FROM LEFT: LESLIE PLAZA/JOHNSON/ICON SPORTS/WIRE/GETTY IMAGES; PERRY KNOTTS/GETTY IMAGES; MITCHELL LEFT/GETTY IMAGES

“You could hear the ricochet off his elbow and face mask and it shot like 40 yards backwards,” Fassel says. “Yeah, that was cool.”

In Week 3 the Eagles blocked Karty on two consecutive field goal attempts utilizing a rush scheme that bludgeoned one of the Rams’ protectors in the outer “C” gap and performed what coaches call a “corkscrew” action to penetrate the vacant space. The attack was so precise that the Rams tried to counter—it didn’t work—by replacing one of its blockers from one kick to the next. Clearly, Philadelphia knew the pressure point it was trying to expose.

It could be that all of this—knuckleball kicks, longer field goals, an increased number of blocks—are at least somewhat connected. Mike Westhoff, one of the NFL’s most recognizable special teams coaches, who retired after a 33-year career last year, feels that kickers attempting 70-yard field goals are unconsciously lowering the angle of the ball, a necessity to drive it longer distances, thus making it easier to block. And the inability to protect kickers may be a

kind of breaking point of roster construction. Reserve offensive linemen, backup tight ends and defensive players, some of whom make up the protection units on field goals and PATs, are worse and less experienced as blockers than ever before. This was an inefficiency ripe for taking advantage of, especially since, as special teams coordinators can universally attest, none of them were given an increase in practice time during the week to solve all these issues.

SPECIAL MOMENTS

Fassel (far left) and Chimere Dike (17) shape the Titans’ innovative return unit; Philly’s Jordan Davis (90) beat the Rams by returning a field goal block for a TD.



Commissioner Roger Goodell, when asked about the new kickoff during the league's international series, admitted there was an intentionality behind bringing special teams to the forefront, though fixing one problem could have "another effect." Regardless, everyone touching the sport feels it. Longtime kick returners like Jamal Agnew of the Falcons says he feels revived, no longer relegated to eternally watching touchback

THREES COMPANY

Aubrey (17) has made 90.6% of his field goals from 50 yards or more, the highest success rate in NFL history (minimum: 30 tries).

kicks fly over his head ("I always want to take it out on every kick," he says). Kickers are emboldened, with some in their circles wondering if dominating field position means bigger paydays (most kickers in the NFL make less than \$4 million per season). Coaches, Ross says, have more access to "varsity" players than ever before.

Ross also says something one can imagine many special teams coaches are thinking but aren't quite ready to say out loud.

They have long been ignored for bigger opportunities (the Ravens' John Harbaugh is the only current NFL head coach with a majority special teams background, and even he had to spend a year as a defensive position coach before getting hired by Baltimore), and no special teams coordinator has ever won the assistant coach of the year award. But now special teams specialists are seeing a public legitimization of private mastery.

"Special teams is not just a slack hire anymore," Ross says. "It's a factor. It matters and I think it's going to continue to shape the game."



A **S ORNER**, the private kicking coach, was getting off the phone, the car door shut and he began walking toward the practice field for a lesson with a youth client currently in ninth grade—one of hundreds of clients in high school or college.

In his spare time Orner has been scouring Instagram pages of amateur kickers—some without any traceable sports background—making trick-shot kicking videos and high-wire soccer free kicks. He says he learns as much from younger kids, and these videos, as he does from professionals. This is going to be the future—an opinion that Orner shares with many special teams coaches, who believe that knucklekicks are just the beginning.

“I watch that stuff and people would think I’m crazy,” he says. “But I’m not crazy when two of my guys [Fitzgerald and Karty] are leading the league in field position percentage.”

Orner says that Fitzgerald, for instance, has yet to debut in an NFL game a version of his knuckleball kick that does not require any

steps to lead in. He imagines that by Week 13 or 14, Fitzgerald will be able to debut “the real cool ones.” When pressed for details, he says Fitzgerald and Karty can kick balls that have a helicopter-style spin; balls that, from their right foot, can mimic the banana-like wobble of a left-footed punt; and, with less consistency, something that he refers to as the “Texas Tornado.”

“It spins like a tornado [when it hits the ground] and it will run back 15 yards,” he says. “Just like Rory McIlroy’s pitching wedge. We’ve been working on this for about three or four years and we finally got some distance to it. So we’ll see.”

With this in mind, a recent Giants practice took on an entirely different vibe. Silence across a chilly, sun-splashed field in East Rutherford, N.J., was broken by the loud *thwump* of a football barreling end over end through a JUGS machine toward return man Gunner Olszewski, who was simulating his task for the weekend ahead. As the wind picked up and the angle of the machine was altered, some of the balls drifted left or right. One of them died at his feet and bounced off his shin.

The Giants have two players—punter Jamie Gillan, a Scottish-born rugby player, and kicker Jude McAtamney, an Irish-born former Gaelic football player—who can hit knuckleball kickoffs in practice. A third, long snapper Casey Kreiter, is spotted sometimes attempting knuckleball kickoffs and his special teams coordinator, Michael Ghobrial, will look over and say, “What are you doing, dude?”

Ghobrial, who coaches one of the best kickoff coverage units in the NFL, says that he could probably hit a knuckleball too, just not on purpose or with any idea of where it might land.

His joke broke the seriousness of what was otherwise a display of how deeply he cares about his life’s vocation. He wasn’t buying the idea that his day-to-day experience amid this special teams coup was necessarily different for him because “the level of importance of special teams has always been held with the utmost regard.”

He adds: “It’s why I do what I do.” Still, he admits that now everyone is watching the opening kickoff. Everyone is watching the return. Everyone is watching every field goal and punt and extra point. It matters in a very specific sense as it pertains to expected points and field position and the little moments that now define wins and losses like never before.

But it also matters because something—a way of life—out there on that sunny practice field, and thousands everywhere just like it, was about to die.

“To have it back,” he says, just minutes before donning a royal blue jacket and lining up his punt unit, “is exceptional.” □



LONG DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS

NFL KICKERS HAVE STEADILY EXPANDED THEIR FIELD GOAL RANGE IN RECENT YEARS—AND COACHES ARE MORE WILLING TO TRY FROM 50 YARDS OR MORE THAN EVER BEFORE

	AVG. FG DISTANCE	50+ ATTEMPTS	50+ MADE	50+ SUCCESS RATE
2025*	41.2	119	84	70.6%
2024	40.1	279	195	69.9%
2023	39.1	230	158	68.7%
2022	39.3	224	154	68.8%
2021	38.6	182	120	66.3%
2020	38.9	168	106	63.1%

*Through Week 7

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Andrew, U.S. Army Veteran, and Apollo

He's a rough-and-tumble Scot who was raised on rugby, but don't be fooled. Richie Gray, aka **THE COLLISION KING**, is using a cerebral approach to change the way NFL teams think about the way their players hit each other—and make the game safer





JOBB

by **GREG BISHOP**
photograph by **THOMAS LOVELOCK**

ENGLISH STUFFIN'

Gray paid a visit to the Jaguars when they were in London in October to help them with their blocking and tackling.

A

A DISILLUSIONED rugby lifer walks into a local pub in his small Scottish Borders hometown in 2006. But the only walks-into-a-bar joke that day is on *him*.

For the previous 12 years, Richie Gray had worked for the Scottish Rugby Union as its development czar. Note the past tense. Earlier that month, the organization laid him off. “I was disillusioned,” he says now, 19 years later. “A real kick in the teeth.”

That night, Gray gathers with his mates from childhood; rugby gladiators, all. These scarred, squatty men grew up here, in Galashiels, a town of 12,600 where textile mills churned out cashmere and Gray’s father coached the province’s team. There’s a family-run cinema, an architectural trail and manicured gardens. The town is a living postcard, its quaintness in contrast with the worn faces of the tough bastards raised on rugby.

Gray orders a malt whisky, same as always. He’s more than disillusioned. He’s newly married, with a child on the way, a mortgage he just closed and no job. He doesn’t doubt he could find another gig in rugby. But that’s no longer what he wants. He’s thinking bigger, broader.

After a whisky or three, Gray drops his cautious stance on his own future and says the quiet part, what he really wants, out loud. “I’m going to be different. I’m going to concentrate on contact and collision only, and I’m going to become the best in the world at it.”

When these mates reaffix their respective jaws to their faces, they start ... *laughing*. Big, belly guffaws, doubling over, wondering if he’s delusional or joking or both. “You’ll never work again,” one tells Gray.

Gray, in contrast, sees the future. Contact sports, he argues, are played by ever bigger, ever faster, ever stronger people, each trained, conditioned and fortified with modern performance and recovery methods. Meaning ... more collisions. More forceful collisions. And, in all likelihood, more injuries from the physics involved alone.

On this night, Gray makes his argument. But stop there? Oh, no. He vows to become the world’s foremost contact/collision coach. To do that, he tells the men who laugh at him, he must stay in rugby. But he must also do something no one like him had ever before considered.

“I’m going to have to be involved in the NFL,” Gray says.

Everyone at the table erupts, once more, into a round of laughter.



AT THE END of a Zoom call over the summer, Gray mentions his ... branding. He has T-shirts. He rises from his office chair in Scotland and grabs one, proudly displaying it on the laptop screen.

The Collision King.

That *is* him. But Richie Gray is not some barbarian who laughs at science. He reads dense research papers for “fun.” He wants collision sports to be as safe as possible. And he has ideas, so-so-so many ideas, for how to do this, along with methodology, equipment, contacts and experience.

This might sound audacious, delusional, an oxymoron—*safer collision sports*. His quest winds, across an ocean, over two decades, to a sport that devotes little time or resources toward the craft of tackling, despite, you know, *a tackle* ending the majority of

Walter Payton and the 1985 Bears. One Christmas, he received a bona fide NFL jersey: Marino’s aqua No. 13.

Valerie Gray gave birth to Richie in April 1970. He was the oldest of three tough brothers. Quaint backdrops aside, the south of Scotland was known as the Lawless Lands. It’s where William Wallace planned his raids on England. The Romans, known for their gladiator toughness, gave up fighting the lawless south. They built Hadrian’s Wall 25 miles from Galashiels for their own protection. Reivers—similar to modern-day gangsters—rode horses from town to town. Each was then constructed and fortified on principles of defense and attacking.

“I’m fascinated in why we do what we do,” Gray



*Asked to describe a **PROPER TACKLE**, Gray says, “The key is stopping ballcarrier momentum. Ideally, you want to knock them back. [If that’s not possible], then you have angle tackles.”*

plays. Gray has already done this in rugby, his approach grounded on development—of skill and technique, as humans collide with other humans.

From consulting for NFL teams for almost a decade to being (brotherly) shoved into prominence after helping hone the Eagles’ Tush Push, he has always seen football as two simple endeavors: blocking and tackling. Schematics, Gray believes, long ago overtook technical accuracy in relative importance to NFL teams. “I saw an area of the game that was being ignored,” he says, “although it was the biggest single challenge in player health and safety.”

AS A KID in Scotland, Gray still stumbled into America’s favorite collision sport. By age 12, he knew that every Sunday, on Channel 4, the network played a tape-delayed broadcast of a featured NFL game. He’d settle into the living room, near the massive window overlooking Galashiels.

He loved football collisions and fell for the sport’s best players and teams—Dan Marino, Joe Theismann, Marcus Allen, Eric Dickerson,

says. “Does your history and your culture define who [you are] and why? I think it does.”

His father, Johnny, now 84, introduced Richie to rugby when the boy turned 5. Johnny coached many of the country’s seminal rugby figures, and Richie became a ball boy for his father’s squads. “[I was],” he says, “brought up in collision and contact.”

Richie recalls the rugby field in front of his primary school; the sport was part of his curriculum. If he or friends had a rugby ball and five minutes, they played, wherever, whenever, full contact, no warmup. They didn’t need a pitch. They used hillsides, grass patches and flat stretches of nearby woods, even if that meant occasionally running into trees—which sparked his ingenuity. They all played Border League Rugby, the oldest and perhaps most brutal league in the world.

Rugby, like professional football, presented almost no safety regulations in those days. Players could jump on top of competitors, leading with their cleats, as well as punch and elbow.

Richie’s scars are part of his expertise. The first: age 12, top of right ear sliced open, part of said ear ripped off, dangling. Richie was ... proud. Same as the times, plural, he broke his nose. Same as the time another collision collapsed that nose into his face. Same as when he broke bones, tore ligaments, dislocations, whatever.

WRAP SESSION

Gray has worked with three-quarters of the league’s teams, including the Giants, whose leading tackler through the first seven weeks was one of his students, Okereke [58].

At 18, he earned a spot on the Galashiels team. In 1999, he captained that squad to its first Scottish Cup triumph. He represented his country at high school and college levels and flirted with the national team but wasn't quick or athletic enough—especially not after one opponent knee dropped him and tore his ACL in a college-aged World Cup appearance.

TO UNDERSTAND the Collision King's one-of-one career, start with collision sports' caveman era. For all his brawn, Gray also approached rugby from an intellectual bent. He completed his degree in physical education, with honors, in 1995. That same year, rugby in Scotland went professional. The Scottish Rugby Union offered a meager salary—£25,000—to make him a rugby development officer/coach. Gray didn't have the faintest clue what that even meant. Still, no one had been paid to participate in rugby before. He spent the next five years creating a development model from scratch.

This wasn't his father's rugby any longer. Johnny took his first coaching gig, gratis, in 1969. His approach wasn't exactly scientific. He brought oranges for his players to consume at halftime. His pregame notes from his greatest triumph, a victory over the Australian national team, consisted of a mere four lines.

Richie had access to information his father could never have envisioned, allowing the younger Gray to study the world's best teams. He ordered books on strategy and performance training from all over the world. He collected VHS tapes, piling them near his television until the stacks stood higher than the TV. He devoured documentaries, also on performance, even one featuring Olympic rowing coaches.

His family refers to Gray's endless pursuit of knowledge as his Zombie Mode. He'd often just disappear into the garage, to begin another round of tinkering. When Gray made his first contact/collision sled, in 2010, he named it...the Collision King. It took so long to construct just one, that, after he finished, his wife said, "Yeah, you'll not be doing that again."

Gray recently finished his 52nd contact/collision device and completed the final adjustments to another enhanced sled—Collision King II. As the rules of contact sports changed, so did the equipment Gray assembled in that garage. He now develops and sells those products internationally—tackle dummies, handheld shields, sleds, etc.—under his GSI Performance umbrella, which Gray created in 2010.

His approach is based on three critical factors: equipment, methodology and analysis. Each relates to high performance, where gains occur at slim margins. To that end, Gray applied for dozens of patents, design rights and trademarks over the past 15 years.

RUGBY DEVELOPMENT took Gray to South Africa, to the coaching staff of its national team, the mighty Springboks. While there in 2015, he received an unexpected phone call from the head of performance for the Dolphins.

Wayne Diesel told Gray that his staff had scrutinized statistics from rugby World Cups and had come across Gray's influence. In May 2016, the Dolphins flew him to Florida for a week to assess their defenders' tackling techniques and meld minds with Miami's coaches.

Gray didn't attempt to fool the locker room. He delivered brutal honesty, centering his opening salvo on his passion *for* collisions. He wanted accurate, aggressive, dominant, physical players. Not merely the most physical in the league. The most physical on *the planet*.

Gray spoke, as he likes to say, "from the cage." He understood athletes, injuries, how it felt to deliver collisions *and* endure them. The first Dolphins visit went so well, Miami brought him back several times that season. Individual players began reaching out to Gray, asking for additional input.



He approached Kiko Alonso, an early Dolphins favorite whose jersey hangs in Gray's office, differently than, say, Christian Wilkins, the defensive tackle Miami drafted three years later. Alonso needed technique refinement. Wilkins lost force while struggling to bend. Gray helped him incorporate more offseason technique training. In 2022, Wilkins set a single-season record (since eclipsed) for tackles by a defensive lineman (98).

Asked to describe a proper tackle, Gray—whose approach focuses on what he calls the Five Fights—explains: *The key is stopping ball-carrier momentum. Ideally, you want to knock them back. [When that's not possible], then you have angle tackles.*

You have to fight to track. [You want] to get from A to B just before you get to the ballcarrier.

You've got to fight to prepare. [That's] really important; that's within 0.00 to 2.53 meters away from the contact point.

Fight to connect is literally [getting a] shoulder onto ballcarriers; with control, with accuracy; shoulder, wrap, clamp, grip.

Fight to accelerate is once you've made the connection, keeping your feet running on the ground.

And then finish. [That's] also a psychological thing. If I finish on top of you, I'm dominating you.

Matt Burke, the linebackers coach for those Dolphins and now the Texans' defensive coordinator, believes Gray connected with football players because he was both like and not like them. "He can speak to all these crazy Scottish stories, all the wild stuff. But then there's real insight," Burke says. "There's research behind it, things he studied from other sports."

Gray tracked down Marino on that visit in Miami. He explained the jersey and Marino signed some memorabilia for him. At that moment, Gray thought, "I sometimes feel like I'm here for a greater purpose."

He wanted Gray to design something for practices to ward off cut blocks. Gray had seen teams utilize a heavy orange ball, rolling it toward defenders who were taught to block the block and shift away. "But it moves in a straight line," Gray told Dr. Blitz. "It's not realistic to the game at all."

Gray took that starting point and fashioned an entirely new creation, a weighted foam and PVC device he called the Hammer. Coaches can throw it at players' ankles and knees or bounce it off the ground, creating unexpected angles. After Brown received the prototype, he threw it against his office wall and immediately ordered four more.

This past June, Gray visited the Giants during OTAs. Gray believes he can make any tackler around 20% more accurate, while giving them tools to further increase accuracy when he's back across the pond.



"I'm fascinated in why we do what we do," Gray says.

*"Does **YOUR HISTORY AND YOUR CULTURE** define who [you are] and why? I think it does."*

N O ONE IN Miami planned to tell anyone about Gray's influence. But that's not the NFL, where everyone gossips more than any Real Housewife. Adam Gase was fired as Miami's head coach on the last day of 2018. His assistants, also let go, spread all over the league. Many took Gray's collision gospel with them.

Lo and behold, Gray soon had a tree of his own, in a sport where he knew no one two years earlier. He began consulting with franchises all over the league.

Gray's tentacles continued to spread. USA Football tasked him with writing its tackling methodology. The National Federation of High School Football adopted his program, too. College teams began reaching out. Riddell, which supplies helmets to players across the NFL, partnered with GSI on a three-year deal for exclusive manufacturing and distribution rights. So did rugby squads, like RC Toulon in France. World Rugby adopted his tackling methodology/standards, too.

The beauty in Gray's approach lay in that authenticity. He told locker rooms he didn't know the names of the star players, that he would treat them all the same. In Miami, one such player went to the office of Vance Joseph, then the defensive coordinator, and said, "Coach, we love this guy. But does he seriously not know who we are?"

Another coach introduced Gray to Don Brown, a longtime defensive coordinator and head coach in college football known as Dr. Blitz.

The Giants flew Gray in on a Monday. He worked with defenders from Tuesday through Thursday. Then he flew home, after impacting dozens of lives and as many livelihoods, from Brian Burns to Abdul Carter to Bobby Okereke. "He's very detail-oriented, he has really broken down tackling and contact to a science," says Okereke. "I'm sitting there taking notes. At this point in my career, I just love to learn. So anytime anyone's bringing me new information that can help me level up my game, I'm all in."

Okereke says Gray's lessons have left such a deep imprint that he will carry reminders onto the football field this season, almost as if hearing Gray inside his helmet. In a sport defined by margins as thin as fingernails, this matters.

Gospel proliferated, 24 of 32 NFL franchises now utilize Gray's equipment and methodology. Eventually, the NFL saw what could no longer be ignored. Three-quarters of its franchises found the Collision King's expertise compelling enough to reach out via Zoom or phone calls, or fly him halfway around the world for instruction. Gray says that in one eight-day stretch in August, he spoke with the Broncos, 49ers, Giants, Packers and Raiders. *Five teams in eight days.*

G RAY'S AMBITIONS don't include flag football, less contact or more restrictions on defenders. He wants players he mentors to live in "that millimeter before madness." Those who do, he says, are less likely to get injured—and less often. "I'm going to make big changes to the game, right?" Gray says. "Big changes."

Even in his playing days, Gray understood that coaches often overtrained teams, leading to upticks in injuries sustained in practice. His ACL tear was never



university in Scotland awarded Gray an honorary doctorate last year—making him a Doctor of Collisions.) Gray used to say he wanted to "create surgeons, not butchers." Now, he says, "You're trying to create surgeons with a butcher's mentality."

J OHNNY GRAY joins for a final Zoom interview. His house in Galashiels is only half a mile from his son's. Johnny found Richie's NFL pivot interesting at first. He wasn't surprised.

And yet, news of the Tush Push, its international fame and Richie's role in fine-tuning its effectiveness reached all the way back home. Says Johnny, "I quite enjoy it."

Lost in the increasingly hysteric debates over the play, Richie says he cannot find one scientific, objective study that shows the Tush Push is any more dangerous than a typical QB sneak. The real issue, Gray believes, is the name. There is a tush involved. But the two players behind Jalen Hurts aren't there to push him forward, necessarily. They're there, Gray says, to guide him into open space. More cocoon than snowplow, in other words. A more accurate name, Gray believes, would be Organized Mass. "A lot of the time, those two back pushers never get to Hurts," Gray says. "The job's done before then."

To banish the Brotherly Shove—Gray's preferred term—24 owners had to vote to outlaw it. They fell two short. "I genuinely don't think the sport understands the play," Gray says. "They just see it as big men bashing other big men. [But] if you actually look down on a

Gray used to say that he wanted to create surgeons, not butchers. Now, he says, "You're trying to create surgeons with
A BUTCHER'S MENTALITY."



properly treated. Caveman tendencies mattered. But that approach baked in its limitations. His doesn't rob football of its soul. It presents a smarter, safer, more scientific approach to navigating what Gray hopes will always be a violent ethos. "You can't change the essence of the game—and not just football," he says. "They're there because there is a desire, and there is a need. Because the human being loves to watch [collisions, violence]. We're preparing players to go into that environment and not just pay it lip service. It's gotta be the right way."

The point has never been to simply collide. Gray argues that technically accurate thumpers are safer thumpers, too. Gray is inventing new equipment that medical staffs can use to help players return and distributing protocols to ensure they do so safely. (A major

field, with a drone, there are angles and forces in play. They don't [lead] with their heads. And the quarterback is actually just getting a free ride. He's insulated."

That's Gray's educated opinion, and the NFL seems more and more interested in what he has to say. In March 2024, officials invited Gray to their league meetings to address the hip-drop tackle. He also spoke to officials from all 32 teams. "Very easy, really, to show that this is not a good technique to be using in the game," he says.

Soon another round of franchises called—just as his visa ran out. Gray took calls with about 15 teams over videoconference, instead.

When talking to league officials, Gray included his thoughts on how football—especially contact/collision—should be played. He asked what many NFL defenders want to know: *Why don't they practice tackling, this central part of football, from January to July?* He showed them clips of Wilkins, toiling all offseason, just as Gray designed.

Saints director of sports science Ted Rath sees more buy-in of Gray

and his approach at a league-wide level each offseason. Like others who know the Collision King, he wonders if one team will hire Gray and shut him off from everybody else. One NFL official has already told him that sooner or later, he will be forced to choose.

Or there's a broader possibility: that he will work for the league, instead. "A big, audacious goal," Rath calls it. "But that's how this game has been invented. Richie's the guy to do it. [He's] going to make the tackle more productive and more efficient and keep our guys out of harm's way. The whole league should [benefit from] it."

Were Gray ever to be made the NFL's contact/collisions czar, he would start by establishing a skills department for every team to make tacklers more accurate. While Gray understands why a powerful, money-printing sports league would want to keep its players safer, he also believes that the reduction in live tackling has actually made the situation worse. More than one study has found an increase in injuries each September. Gray believes that players' bodies are not fortified in ways they could be, owing, in large part, to collectively bargained restrictions on contact. But Gray sees this callusing of bodies as the less critical of his two main prongs. Accuracy matters more—and accuracy cannot simply be summoned in training camp. It must be built. For example, a linebacker not wearing pads will start his tackle about three inches farther away from the target. NFL defenders do that for six weeks before transitioning to pads, which presents an entirely different angle, grip, wrap, clamp—an entirely different *everything*.

"This needs to be researched, analyzed and implemented," Gray says.

Gray now accumulates airline miles the way his protégés rack up safe tackles. Before one recent flight from Newark back to Scotland, he noticed five middle-aged men dressed impeccably, in full, colorful, velour tracksuits, sitting in an airport lounge. Upon boarding, Gray was seated next to them. He introduced himself—"Hey, guys, you're dressed like superstars"—thus hitting it off with The Sugarhill Gang.

"Have you ever heard a song called 'Rapper's Delight'?" one asked.

Of course he had! Most anyone who meets Gray, like these 60-something rappers, will ask what he does, too. "I coach contact and collision," he says. In the U.S.? Well, yes, in fact.

"Have you ever heard of the Tush Push?" □

PUSHING FORWARD

In addition to helping the Eagles hone the Brotherly Shove, Gray has worked in many levels of football and as an adviser to rugby teams.



BACK LIKE

SHE
NEVER
LEFT





by
EMMA BACCELLIERI

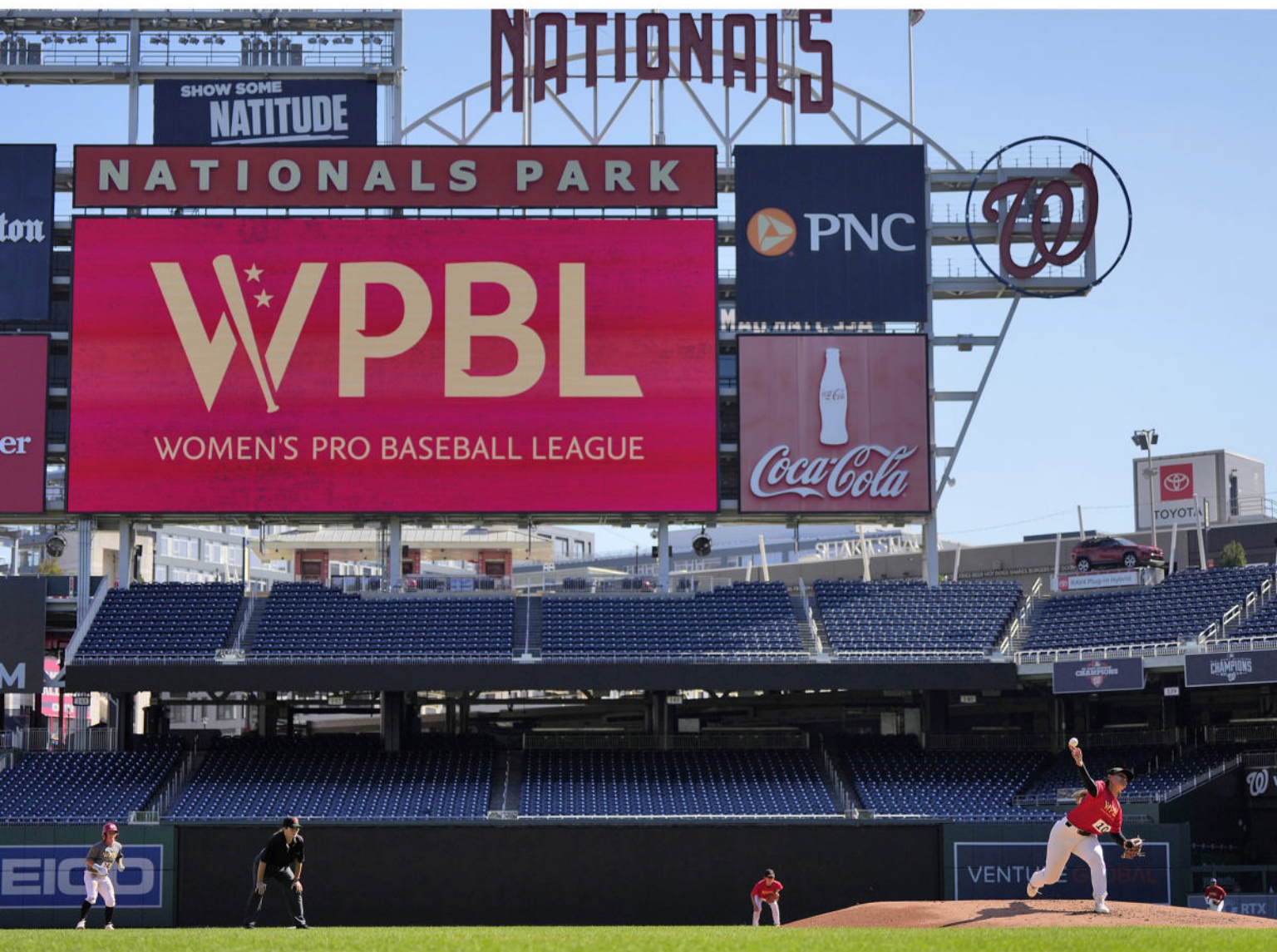
More than a decade
after becoming a
Little League sensation
and instant star at age 13,

MO'NE DAVIS

is set to make history
again, this time as the face
of the first U.S. women's
professional baseball
league in 70-plus years

photograph by
JUSTIN JAMES MUIR

DECEMBER 2025 SI.COM 45



FINAL CUT

The last day of WPBL tryouts at Nationals Park featured a live game, where players like trailblazing two-way star Whitmore (above, pitching) secured a spot in the inaugural draft.

BEFORE JUSTINE SIEGAL decided anything else about the Women's Pro Baseball League, she decided that it would announce itself to players with a big, open tryout.

That was about practicality as much as principle. Siegal felt she had to cast a wide net: For every woman already on her radar, each one who had been among the only girls at the Little League World Series or had been invited to play for USA Baseball's women's national team, there might be half a dozen others who remained totally unknown. Siegal, 50, understood that

JESS RAPOGEL/BETTY IMAGES

dynamic better than anyone. She made her name in men's baseball—which she has spent her life arguing is not interchangeable with *baseball*. She was the first woman to throw batting practice for a major league team (Cleveland in spring training in 2011) and the first woman hired as a coach for a major league organization (Oakland in the instructional league in '15). She organizes a girls' baseball tournament each summer and runs a nonprofit, Baseball For All, focused on keeping girls in the game, and she spends so much time explaining what that means.

Yes, baseball, not softball.

There are plenty of girls who happily play softball. But there have always been some who choose it only because they feel there is no way to play baseball. How many former college softball players had always harbored secret baseball dreams? How many women around the world had spent their lives believing their biggest stage could only ever be a local men's rec league? Siegal wanted to consider all of them. And she did not want to start off telling anyone no before they had even stepped on the field. She knew that most of them had already heard enough of that.

"So many women have been told that they can't play baseball," Siegal says. "I didn't want to be the next person to say, *Sorry, this league's not for you, either.*"

In the months leading up to the August tryouts in Washington, D.C., the WPBL—cofounded by Siegal and Canadian businessman Keith Stein, with an advi-

Many players never believed something like this could happen. It was the first major attempt to organize pro baseball for women since the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League in the 1940s and '50s. The WPBL released plans for a very modest start: It would launch with six teams, predominantly in the Northeast, playing seven weeks beginning in May 2026; players would earn a few thousand dollars along with room and board. But these women cared only that it could exist in the first place.

The most famous girl to play the game was now a young woman, a decade removed from becoming the only name that most people know in connection with her gender and her sport, and she had spent years telling people that she was done playing. She had spent years telling *herself* that she was done playing. But then Mo'ne Davis picked up her phone and scrolled past an Instagram post about a new baseball league. She assumed it had to be fake. That did not matter. She could not stop thinking about it.

BACK IN 2014, when she was on top of the planet, when she was the first girl to pitch a shutout at the Little League World Series, when she was on the cover of this magazine and getting recognized everywhere she went and fielding requests from what felt like every corner of the country, Davis heard something that she never forgot.

In the immediate aftermath of that wild run in Williamsport, Pa., her coach told her, "Mo, I don't want this to be the greatest thing you do in your life. I don't want you to be 35 years old stuffing yourself in your old Little League jersey and signing at a card show." She took that message to heart.

That was not his plan when he delivered it to her. "When they're

There are plenty of girls who happily play softball, but only because they feel there is **NO WAY TO PLAY BASEBALL.**

sory board that includes women's baseball pioneer Maybelle Blair and former Diamondbacks executive Nona Lee, among others—reached out to top players, securing participation from members of the national team and sending personalized invites to other prospects. The league announced its first player commitment: Kelsie Whitmore, the pitcher who spent the last few years grinding through a string of "firsts" and "onlys," playing alongside men in the Atlantic League and with the Savannah Bananas.

13, you feel like they're not even listening to whatever you say," Steve Bandura says now. He was stunned when Davis, now 24, recently used that quote in a newspaper interview to describe what had shaped her life after that famous shutout. *You remember that?* Of course she did. Bandura met Davis back when she was in elementary school and had coached her in multiple sports, and he'd always recognized how smart she was, how good a listener, how thoughtful. Of course she would hold on to something like that.

She was invited to the White House. She published a memoir. She struck out Jimmy Fallon on *The Tonight Show*, she was the subject of



MO'NE BALL

Since becoming the first girl to throw a LLWS shutout, Davis has interned in the Dodgers' video department and earned her master's in sports management.

a documentary by Spike Lee, and she had not yet turned 15. She kept thinking about those words from her coach all the while.

Davis continued playing baseball through her teenage years. (She loved her team far too much to leave them.) But she was adamant that she would be done after high school. She did not want to be tied to this forever. A skilled point guard who dreamed of playing at UConn and was congratulated by Huskies coach Geno Auriemma after the LLWS, she focused on basketball at first, and then pivoted to softball, making the same calculation that so many female baseball players do when faced with the value of a college scholarship.

She played for Hampton University in Virginia, and there was plenty that she enjoyed about the experience. Davis loved being at an HBCU. She appreciated her teammates. She liked not being the only girl on the field. But it did not take long to realize what she had known from the beginning: She did not really love softball. It was a fine sport, but it was not *her* sport, and that only felt more obvious with each passing game. The most famous Little League pitcher of her generation had needed to become an infielder to make the switch between sports. Davis missed being on the mound—the strategy, the adjustments, the feel of the ball in her hand. “She’s such a cerebral player,” Bandura says. She missed how she had been able to use that mental skill in baseball.

When she lost a season due to the pandemic, Davis didn’t bother to take an extra year of eligibility. She decided that she had played enough softball after two seasons at Hampton, finishing with 24 RBIs and 47 hits in 68 career games. That meant charting the next chapter of her life. Davis earned her degree in communications and enrolled in a master’s program in sports management at Columbia. She liked the idea of building a career around professional athletics. But she realized when she graduated that she did not know exactly how that should look.

“She has a lot of options and a lot of talents,” says Bandura, who works for the Philadelphia Department of Parks & Recreation and serves as program director for the Anderson Monarchs youth sports teams. “She just wasn’t sure which direction she wanted to go in.”

Davis had speaking opportunities and public appearances and invitations to sit on committees. But she was mindful of what her coach had told her all those years ago. She did not want to be forever pulled back into her past. She just did not know how to start defining her future, which is what she was wrestling with when she came across the news about the WPBL.

She did not mention the league to anyone initially. But she did enough research to learn that it was real. Davis saw that Siegal was one of the founders and that Whitmore had signed on. She kept thinking about it. Then she got a call from Bandura.

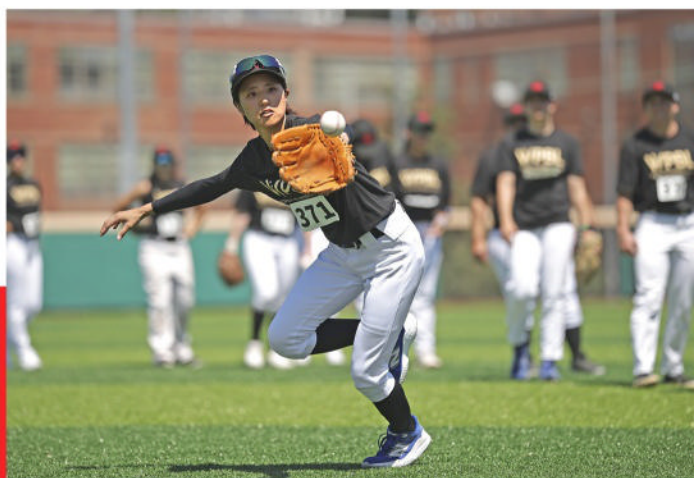
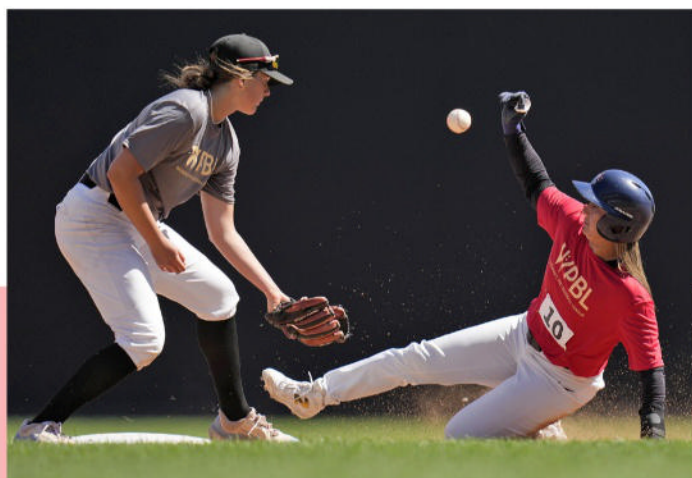
Did you see this? You should do it, he told her.

“I felt like I was kind of washed,” Davis says. “Like I didn’t have anything left.”

C’mon, Bandura told her. *You’re 24.*

He thought about a recent conversation he had with another one of his former players. That young man was also fresh out of college, unsure about what should come next, weighing the idea of playing Independent League ball against the need to get a job, make some money, start going to an office





SKILLS SHOW

The WPBL's roster of draft-eligible players includes (clockwise from top left) college softball player Brittany Apgar, Davis, 17-year-old Maika Dumais and Savannah Bananas pitcher Whitmore.

every day. “You’ve got another 45 years to do that,” Bandura told him. “You’re going to look back and wish you had played.” He felt the same was true for Davis—except, of course, for all the ways in which it was so clearly not. Everything had always been a little different for her.

She hadn’t played baseball in almost six years. Davis had thrown out ceremonial first pitches, and she had appeared in the alumni game at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown in 2024, but she hadn’t *played*.

In college, she’d spent a summer interning in video production for the Dodgers, and even those long days at the park had not been enough to make her think about picking up a ball. She had been so firm about being done that she did not know how to start again. But

she didn’t have to worry about that, Bandura told her. She just had to meet him at the field.

They had been meeting there nearly her entire life. Bandura started to help coach Davis when she was 7 in basketball, soccer and baseball, all with the boys, at Marian Anderson Recreation Center in Philadelphia. They’d become like family to one another. How many evenings had he thrown her batting practice over the years? How many hours had they logged at this same field? They started meeting there again.

“It was typical Mo’ne,” says Bandura. “The first five pitches I threw her were all line drives.”

What she had been more concerned about was her pitching. But the fastball was still there. She needed to regain the feel on her curve, but that showed promise soon enough, too. They did that first workout together

in July—less than two months before the tryouts for the WPBL. And her coach was encouraged by what he saw. Davis was not chasing her own ghost. She was just playing ball.

“She’s not trying to reach back for some long-lost glory,” Bandura says. “She enjoys the game.”

She began thinking about how convinced she had been that she needed to leave the sport. “There’s so many interviews out there of me saying, *No, I don’t want to play baseball, I don’t want to play baseball*,” says Davis. Maybe it wasn’t that she didn’t want to play. Maybe it was that she’d never imagined a way that she actually could. This league was small and new, with no guarantees, but it could turn out to be a real opportunity.

She asked her agent for his thoughts. (“No brainer,” Clinton Reyes says. “If you don’t try out, you’re always going to wonder, *What if?* The passion wasn’t really always there for those other things. Baseball is where it always has been.”) And then came a call with Siegal. The pair had never talked much previously. But they had been placed in the same context for a long time.

T **HERE WERE** 600 players at the tryouts. The group included everyone from teenagers up to women in their 50s. They came from 10 countries, including Japan, Australia, Mexico, Taiwan and South Korea, and from all over the United States. Some had played with or against each other for years. Others walked into the ballpark as strangers to everyone there. All had lived very different baseball lives that happened to be tied by one common thread. They shared that over four days of drills and simulation games, with scouts and executive leadership watching, all for the chance to enter the league’s pool of eligible prospects. The inaugural WPBL draft is scheduled for late 2025.

Siegal briefly took refuge from the heat one afternoon in a conference room overlooking the field. She had points to make about finances, quality of play and the developing talent pipeline. She turned for a moment to something else.

“As much as I think baseball is the greatest game on earth,” she says slowly, “it’s been a driving force in a lot of pain in my life.”

She’s not the only one. Being the first girl or the only woman can be a lonely exercise. And none of the players in that situation sought out that notoriety. Their goal was not to play with boys or men. Their goal was to play baseball. Siegal has seen that desire both in players who force themselves to leave the game and in players who do anything they can to stay. She has recognized it in both Davis

At first, Davis was **UNSURE IF SHE STILL HAD THE SKILLS:** *“I felt like I was kind of washed. Like I didn’t have anything left.”*

Any discussion of women in baseball nearly always touched on both of them. (They were put on the same NPR panel to discuss the subject in 2018.) Siegal had closely watched Davis’s run at the LLWS: Back then, she’d reached out to Bandura, and she’d met the young player briefly a few times, but she’d always been wary of requesting anything directly from Davis. “I didn’t want to be another adult trying to take from her,” Siegal says. Now, a decade later, they both remembered that as they discussed the new league. *What do you want?* Siegal asked. She told Davis the WPBL would be happy to have her in any capacity. If she wanted to coach, to broadcast, to be a general league representative—they would take it. This was up to her.

She did not have to think about it. Davis knew. She wanted to play.

and Whitmore. She has watched younger players get to carry less and less of that weight. But she knows they all still carry some of it.

A group of players grabbed dinner together after the first day of tryouts. “Girls’ night out,” Whitmore joked. Her heart cracked open as soon as the words left her mouth. She thought of all the times she was the only woman. Every at-bat could feel like a referendum not just on her but on her entire gender. “The isolation has always been real,” Whitmore says. And here she was making a joke—girls, plural. She could hardly believe the sense of freedom.

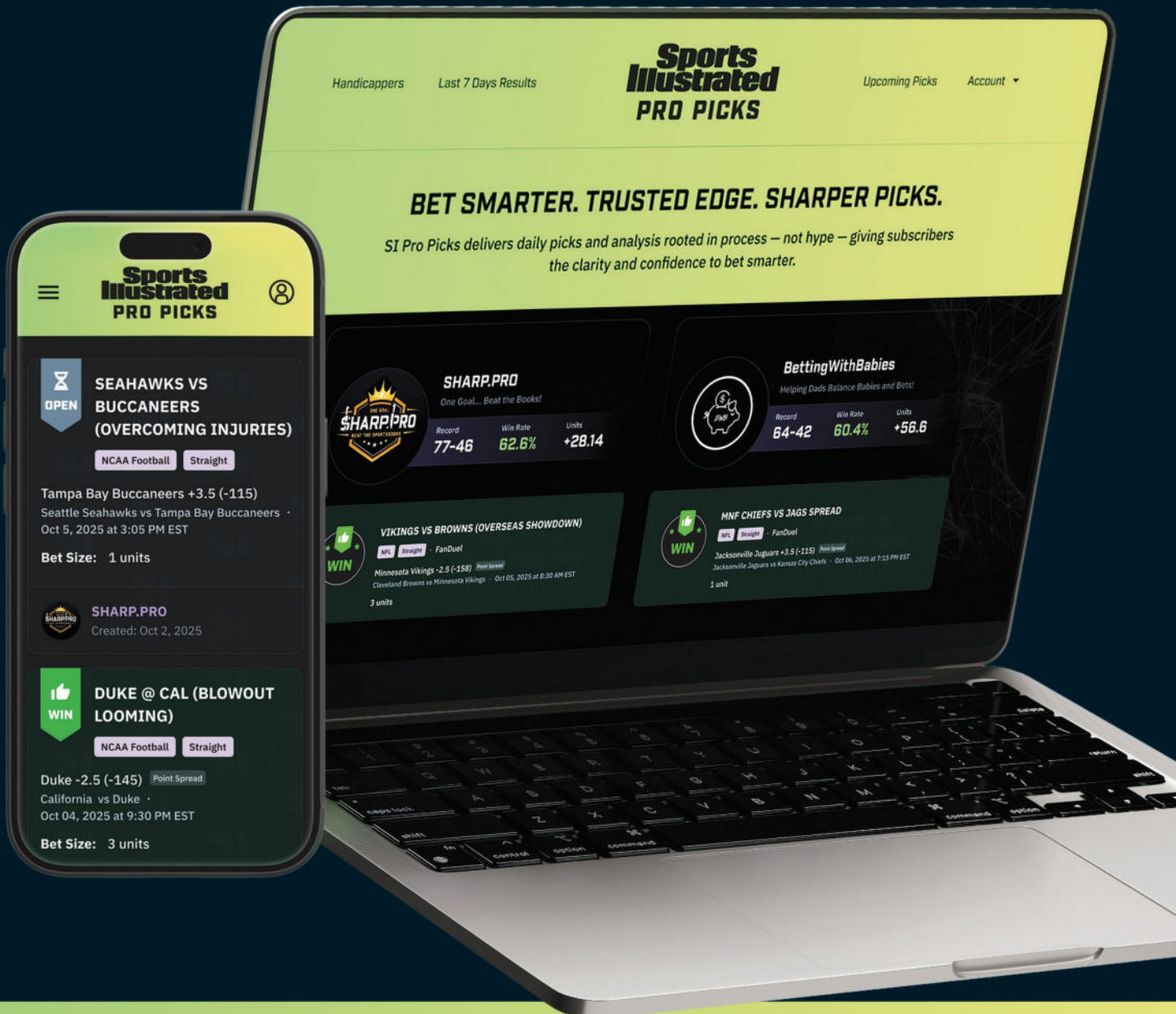
Whitmore and Davis each had given so many interviews over the years as the *first* or the *only*—positioned as singular figures, anomalies, wholly unconnected from any other girl who might have ever played the game. Now they sat together. Davis noted that she had never played baseball with other women before that week. This was all new for her, but it was so familiar, too.

“I felt right at home.”

□

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LET'S

Fine(ish) dining at stadiums. Elite athletes subsisting on junk food. Road racers running on cheap beer and delectable pastries. The intersection of food and sports is fascinating, unexpected—and, above all, always tasty





BY
STEVE RUSHIN

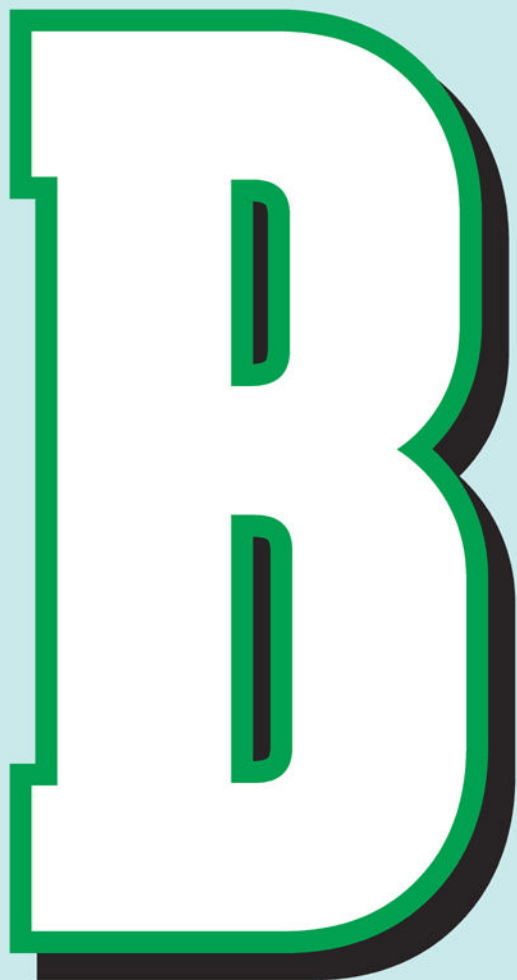
It's unavoidable.
If you go to a game, the
BALLPARK GRUB
being served is going
to be as much a part of
the experience as the
contest itself

SNACK

AT THE PARK



PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY
EDDIE GUY 



BEHOLD THE batting helmet sundae, striated coil of vanilla soft serve extruded into a plastic hat and stabbed, at point of purchase, with a spoon that stands on its own, like the ceremonial first shovel at some grand civic groundbreaking. It's a Wednesday afternoon at Citi Field and cupped in your trembling hand is a miniature Mets batting helmet. Pasteurized, homogenized, romanticized, the helmet sundae is the sun-kissed marriage of Mr. Softee and Mrs. Met, food and baseball, a divine partnership. And what God has joined together, let no man tear asunder.

This is a love story about stadium food. Last spring, television cameras caught a couple at Wrigley Field *Lady and the Tramp*-ing a hot dog, attacking it simultaneously from either end until they eventually met in the middle for a kiss.

At the same park, in 2012, the center-field message board flashed a fifth-inning proposal: ERICA, WILL YOU MARRY ME? Alas, Erica's seat was empty. Only when she returned from her beer run, a cold one in either hand, was the message reposted while her suitor, Greg, took a knee, their relationship consecrated in two-fisted splendor.

America's greatest living poet attended a Red Sox game with his daughter's fiancé in 1928, and seemed to regret the road not taken. Robert Frost left Fenway feeling slightly emasculated after being outeaten by his future son-in-law, James Dwight Francis. "I had a fine time at the ballgame with Dwight," Frost wrote to his daughter Lesley after watching the Sox and Senators split a doubleheader that August. "I didn't quite hold my own on the peanuts and hot dogs. Another time, I'll go prepared to eat everything."

Ninety-seven years later, those last five words remain good advice. Ballpark food is equal parts gluttony and poetry.

*Dippin' Dots, tater tots,
Chicken wings, onion rings.*

That's just one inning at a Rockies game. Eating a sundae from a Mets hat in Flushing, with blue and orange sprinkles forming a lurid simulacrum of sky and sun, a baseball fan is in want of nothing. Until he hears the distant cry of a vendor, calling across the concourse but also echoing across the ages, declaiming another rhymed couplet: "Beer here!"

HUMAN BEINGS have always required sustenance in stadiums. Ancient Romans ate figs, dates, olives and plums while watching gladiatorial combat, according to a 2022 study of the sewers surrounding the Colosseum. Twentieth-century yinzers enjoyed bottled beer, bottled gin and "orange drink" while attending Pirates games, according to a 1970 study by the Mets' right fielder Ron Swoboda of objects thrown at him by fans at Forbes Field. The beer and booze bottles narrowly missed him, but an orange drink carton hit Swoboda in the head. "It looked like a fruit store," he said of the outfield grass, littered in produce.

The stadium food porn that litters Instagram in the 21st century caters to foodies—literally so, if you're ensconced in a suite, dining on penne alla vodka from a stainless-steel roll-top chafer. Esoteric concession stand offerings are often difficult to decipher without a scorecard—Rocky Mountain oysters are testicles, octopus balls are not—but many fans repudiate popcorn and hot dogs for fine dining. Paul McCartney was once fork-fed ravioli off a china plate by his wife in the front row at Yankee Stadium, as if to say: *Working on peanuts is all very fine, but I can show you a better time.*

And good for the gastronomes. But sports fans of a certain age and temperament, the kind who read *gastronome* but hear *Astrodome*, know the stadium foods that truly connect us—across time and continents—are the humble staples of the cheap seats: fan fare for the common man.

THIS PAGE: JEFFREY BROWN/ICON SPORTS WIRE/GETTY IMAGES (COBB); PREVIOUS SPREAD: DANIEL SHIREY/MLB PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES (STADIUM)

IN 1999, a soccer referee named Paul Durkin, officiating the FA Cup match between Chelsea and Oldham in England, was struck from behind by an airborne projectile. He felt the nape of his neck, withdrew his hand and beheld a crimson palm.

"I had a brief moment of panic," he said afterward, "because I was covered in tomato ketchup and I thought it was blood." He'd been hit by the fundamental building block of stadium food everywhere: a hot dog, or sausage roll, or other form of cylindrical meat, grilled, boiled or steamed, and then bunned.

Humphrey Bogart once said, "A hot dog at the game beats roast beef at the Ritz," but a hot dog at the game beats everything. Before Game 1 of the 1956 World Series opener in Brooklyn between the Dodgers and the Yankees, the producers of the television quiz show *I've Got a Secret* conceived a gag. They would have movie star Paul Newman, dressed as an Ebbets Field vendor, surprise one of the show's regular panelists, the humorist Henry Morgan, by selling him a hot dog at his seat.

A **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED** photographer was assigned to capture the moment on film.

Alas, before Newman could get anywhere near Morgan, he was set upon by ravenous Dodgers fans. "I was just swarmed by a pack of hungry rats," he explained. "This one guy kicked me and said, 'Six please!' So I started handing out hot dogs. I sold one whole tray of these things and had to go back for the second one, and by this time, someone had given [Morgan] a hot dog already... It's very nerve-racking. It's sort of survival of the fittest."

Several fans asked Newman, then starring as boxer Rocky Graziano in the MGM biopic *Somebody Up There Likes Me*, where the nearest bathroom was. At the ballpark, he was not a Hollywood celebrity but a mere conduit to fans who wanted to eat hot dogs and void their bladders of beer. In 30 minutes, Newman sold \$26 worth of meat, earning 20 cents a sale, and took home \$2.60.

He didn't know where the bathrooms were.



**"I APOLOGIZE TO
WHOEVER'S HOT
DOG THAT WAS,"**
COBB SAID, WHEN
IT SHOULD HAVE
BEEN THE FAN
APOLOGIZING TO
HIM—TO ALL OF
US—FOR PUTTING
KETCHUP ON A
HOT DOG.

NINE YEARS earlier, in the same park, on the brisk April day that Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball, Rachel Robinson fed the couple's 17-month-old son, Jackie Jr., a bottle warmed by a thoughtful concession stand worker, who immersed it in the hot water used to keep the red hots from going cold. Mrs. Robinson would return to that stand, to warm a bottle, for several years, at a time when baseball and hot dogs were perhaps the two most potent symbols of American ingenuity.

At the height of the Space Race, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev toured a meatpacking plant in Des Moines, where he ate his first American hot dog. Khrushchev lamented that while the Russians had beaten the U.S. to space, the Americans had clearly beaten Russia in the art of sausage making. Khrushchev's counterpart,

President John F. Kennedy, was scheduled to throw out the first pitch on Opening Day of 1963 for the Washington Senators while members of the stadium workers' union were picketing outside D.C. Stadium, pleading with fans to abstain in solidarity. "Please do not buy sodas, beer, peanuts, popcorn, hot dogs, hamburgers, scorecards, novelties or any other items sold in this stadium," their handbills urged. U.S. labor secretary W. Willard Wirtz interceded, scheduling urgent negotiations for the next week. Only then could President Kennedy, in good conscience, eat a hot dog in his box seat.

This summer, concession workers in Boston picketed before a Dodgers-Red Sox game. They sought higher wages while urging fans to patronize the street vendors outside the ballpark, a recognition that *not* eating at Fenway is not really an option, a (Butch) Hobson's choice.

NOTABLE NOSHES



SECRET STADIUM SAUCE

To quote Homer Simpson: It looks like ketchup, it tastes like ketchup, but brother, it ain't ketchup. Baseball's best condiment has got mustard and barbecue sauce notes, and Brewers fans slather it on all manner of sausages. In the 1980s, NBC's Bob Costas and Tony Kubek would take turns broadcasting solo so the other could enjoy a SSS-slathered brat.



DUKE'S MAYONNAISE (ON ANYTHING)

The eponymous condiment is everywhere at the Duke's Mayo Bowl in Charlotte. The winning coach gets doused in it. More interesting, though, are the homemade concoctions ESPN broadcasters have come up with in the booth and eaten on air in recent years. It started with an Oreo dipped in Duke's, then got all *haute cuisine*: a mayo-doused French macaron.



JACKALOPE MAC STACK

Jackalope is notoriously hard to find at a supermarket, mostly because it's a mythical creature: a jackrabbit with antelope horns. So the Broncos improvised, making a sausage out of antelope and rabbit (with some pork thrown in). Toss in some Flaming Cheeto dust (shockingly not mythical), some mac and cheese and you've got a meal that is, like its namesake, legendary.

FROM LEFT: JONATHAN DANIEL/GETTY IMAGES; GRANT HALVERSON/GETTY IMAGES; ANANARK SPORTS + ENTERTAINMENT

LAND OF 10,000
CALORIES



Leave it to the Veeck family's St. Paul Saints (a Triple A team that has a pig named the Great Fatsby deliver balls to the umpire) to come up with this: a single, six-foot long hot dog topped with pulled pork, mac and cheese, fries and jalapeños. It comes with four drinks, a (hopefully unnecessary) reminder that it's not meant to be taken down solo. The cost: \$135, and probably a bit of your dignity.

Eating hot dogs at games is a right, but also a franking privilege that is sometimes abused. Packers wide receiver Randall Cobb, after scoring a touchdown in Green Bay in 2014, Lambeau Leapt into a crowd of fans wearing polystyrene cheddar wedges before emerging from the mob covered in ketchup. "I apologize to whoever's hot dog that was," Cobb said, when it should have been the fan apologizing to him—to all of us—for putting ketchup on a hot dog.

Every so often, as Cobb can attest, athletes and stadium food collide. Shortstop Orlando Arcia, then with the Brewers, once chased a foul ball into the stands in Milwaukee and helped himself to a spoonful of batting-helmet soft serve from an unsuspecting fan in the front row. Yankees first baseman Don Mattingly memorably tracked a foul ball to the railing in New York and

Give these famous stadium delicacies a try. Or don't...

BY MARK BECHTEL



TOASTED GRASSHOPPERS

When the Mariners introduced *chapulines*—otherwise known as fried grasshoppers—in 2017, they ordered 20 pounds of the insects, thinking that would last them well into the season. They sold out on Opening Day. Fans started lining up before the first pitch to get their fix. Dusted with chili-lime salt, the buggers are a high-protein, no-carb option and a great Instagrammable treat.

grabbed a piece of popcorn from the carton of a wonderstruck young fan. After futilely pursuing a foul ball in Detroit, Tigers first baseman Prince Fielder filched a man's nacho as a consolation prize.

In 1933, a Senators fan threw a hot dog at Yankees outfielder Ben Chapman, who provocatively picked it off the Griffith Park sod and ate it, at which time, in that last summer of Prohibition, he was showered with glass soda bottles. Food has always been used as a weapon in stadiums, where we remove our caps for the national anthem and have our bottle caps removed for us, at the concession stand, lest that Pepsi bottle be used to brain a center fielder.

World-class athletes are not immune to the siren song of stadium food. A few years ago the Braves had a soft-serve machine in their clubhouse, replete with mini helmets, so that the Atlanta players could, in theory, eat sundaes out of Braves batting helmets while wearing Braves batting helmets.

Olympic figure skater Debi Thomas, accustomed to fans throwing flowers at her feet at the end of every routine, said that she'd prefer it if they threw pizza instead.

At spring training in 1982, Cubs reliever Rawly Eastwick was watching a game from the stands when he choked on a hot dog and was Heimlich'd by the team trainer. Eastwick then did what any of us would do: He took another bite of the hot dog, with similar results. This time he was rushed to a nearby hospital, where the cylindrical meat was removed from his upper esophagus with a bronchoscope.

During most games, however, there is a bright line dividing fans and players: one eats, the other competes. Even in an era when fans wear caps and jerseys to games, as if they might be summoned to pinch hit at a moment's notice, it is seldom difficult to tell the fans from the athletes.

"I remember when you used to be good," a heckler said to Reds first baseman Joey Votto in 2017, to which Votto replied: "I remember when you used to be thin."



IN FAIRNESS, it has never been easy to be thin in Cincinnati, where the bleachers at old Crosley Field were known—in longtime announcer Waite Hoyt's home run calls—as Burgerville. "He hit it into Burgerville!" was a sponsored shout-out to Burger beer, even though its pitcher was a recovering alcoholic. In 1945, before he joined Alcoholics Anonymous and enjoyed 40 years of sobriety, Hoyt went on a three-day bender that left him AWOL from Reds' broadcasts, an absence the newspapers attributed to amnesia.

Babe Ruth, his former teammate and drinking buddy, knew better. "I heard you got a case of amnesia," he telegraphed Hoyt. "Never heard of that brand."

Beer is to spectator sports what seawater is to shipbuilding, a perpetually replenished ocean that keeps a vast enterprise afloat. There are nearly 100 brews to choose from at White Sox home games, but craft beer's esoteric names—Sex & Candy; Sticky Nuts; Furious George—don't neatly lend themselves to home run calls. In another century, Mel Allen referred to Yankees home runs as "Ballantine blasts," but in 2025, in the

**FIGURE SKATER
DEBI THOMAS,
*ACCUSTOMED TO
FANS THROWING
FLOWERS* AT HER
FEET AT THE
END OF EVERY
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SHE'D PREFER IT
IF THEY THREW
PIZZA INSTEAD.**

South Bronx, the alcoholic beverages are self-aware. Fans can avail themselves of a Two-Rum Home Run, Gold Glove Sour or Ginfielder, though not—or at least not yet—Babe Ruth's Called Shot.

THE BEST fan food is local, where the venue and the menu are indivisible. I have personally enjoyed a pimento cheese sandwich at the Masters, a mint julep at the Kentucky Derby and strawberries and cream at Wimbledon, but I have never enjoyed any of these outside their natural habitats.

In rainy Seattle, there are scattered showers of sausage. The Mariners tether hot dogs in foil sleeves to parachutes. The dogs are dropped from the upper decks of T-Mobile Park into crowds of upstretched arms, seekers straining toward some higher power. "Hot Dogs from Heaven," as the promotion is known, forms a strangely touching tableau: part Allied paratroopers alighting in the D-Day drop zone, part when-pigs-fly whimsy.

In Philadelphia, a city more synonymous with blunt-force trauma, the Phillie Phanatic strafes fans with

point-blank rounds of lukewarm sausage fired from a hot dog cannon.

Each city has its own food rituals, but so does every individual fan. Perhaps you take a highway maintenance man's pride in yellow-striping a hot dog, straight down the middle, at a ballpark mustard pump. You probably have a kitchen cabinet full of stacked souvenir beer cups from stadiums around the world, their colors faded from the depredations of the dishwasher. For a while, I saved the empty La Nova pizza box that served as a warm, dry seat cushion on a snowy day at a Bills game in Buffalo.

Anything object can be fetishized in this way. I once opened a file folder marked "Ballpark Food" in the research library of the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown and—while riffling through newspaper clippings and Xeroxed concession menus—watched a 30-year-old foil hot dog wrapper from Shea Stadium fall out. "I'll take that," said a white-gloved curator, plucking the wrapper from my carrel before—I hope—slabbing it in Lucite like a gem mint '56 Mantle.

Ed Glynn was a Shea Stadium hot dog vendor as a high school student in Flushing before becoming a Mets pitcher in 1979. The team would later present their reliever with a hot dog vendor's case with his No. 48 on it. At Shea's successor, Citi Field, Glynn's successors still sell hot dogs on a Wednesday afternoon, roaming the stands as Paul Newman did in neighboring Brooklyn, where the Nathan's frank was born in 1916. A hundred and nine years later, that hot dog still holds up at the ballpark.

Gaze upon the Nathan's frank, recumbent in its cardboard casket, whose open lid holds a packet of mustard. Tear it open with your teeth and apply its contents with the precision of a pastry chef icing an éclair.

It was here, in New York City, that Harry M. Stevens first married food and fandom on a mass scale. Stevens emigrated from England to Ohio as a teen in 1882, labored as an ironworker, invented the baseball scorecard, but moved to New York and made his fortune selling hot dogs, popcorn and peanuts to fans at Madison Square Garden and the Polo Grounds. "It is believed that Mr. Stevens feeds more gaping human mouths in one day than any other individual in the world," Damon Runyon, the baseball writer turned playwright-novelist, wrote in 1929. "After thirty-five years of stuffing hot dogs, peanuts and ham sandwiches down the gullet of the baseball bug, and the racing nut, Mr. Stevens has so much money that he no longer counts it. He weighs it."

Stevens died in 1934, reportedly of arteriosclerosis, though his demise has since been attributed to pneumonia, confirming what many have long suspected: No food can have a deleterious effect on one's health as long as it's eaten at a live sporting event.

FEMININOMENON

How a simple dream of good food and good games on TV ushered in a new trend: bars dedicated to women's sports

ON A beautiful fall day in Portland, fans gathered inside a local sports bar joking that if they were smart, they would be outside enjoying the sunshine. “The rain is coming,” says a fan sitting by the window, “but I can’t miss this game.”

Game 2 of the WNBA Finals was about to start. It would be a busy NFL Sunday in any sports bar in the country. But at The Sports Bra, the first bar in the United States dedicated entirely to women’s sports, every single TV was tuned into the WNBA. And not just during a big series, but always.

“Our motto is, We support women,” says owner and founder Jenny Nguyen. “There are plenty of bars showing men’s sports. Even on this same block. This one is dedicated to women.”

Everything in the bar is a tribute to women’s sports. The jerseys hanging from the ceiling, the signed posters and memorabilia, even the sports cards pinned to the bathroom walls—Sabrina Ionescu, Billie Jean King, Lisa Leslie, Serena Williams—all

the icons are there. The bar itself is full of mostly women, but men come, too. “I love the Aces,” says a man visiting from Austin watching with a friend. “A’ja Wilson slaps.”

Gina Petrone, a local woman who has been coming to The Sports Bra for years, says she first came because it was a safe space for her community and because she liked the food. “I became a sports fan by default,” she says. “The Bra made me a fan.” She recently joined the lottery for Portland Fire tickets.

At The Sports Bra, Nguyen does everything she can to service her motto. The meat in the cheesesteak is from a woman-owned farm. The beer, wine and liquor are sourced from businesses owned and operated by women. A classic family recipe, “Mom’s Baby Back Ribs,” sits at the top of her menu.



SUPPORT CREW

Now three years old, Portland’s Sports Bra attracts a diverse crowd for diverse events.



BY KIM CURZI

Nguyen says it's common for people to ask if the bar televises men's sports. "People call all the time asking for certain games. They want to know if the Super Bowl will be on," she says. "But we only show sports played by women—that's just our policy."

When the WNBA or NWSL isn't in season, the bar shows softball, lacrosse or gymnastics. Even local roller derby. One exception to the all-female rule is for events like tennis or track and field, where men and women compete on the same broadcast. (And they do air the Puppy Bowl.)

But not every women's sports bar limits programming in this way. The Rough and Tumble in Seattle, for example, played Game 4 of the WNBA Finals on one sound system and Game 5 of the Mariners' ALDS series on the other.

The idea for a bar that exclusively televised women's sports started as a joke between Nguyen and her friends, who were frustrated with the food and viewing options at traditional bars. "We would say, 'Oh, at The Sports Bra, championship volleyball would be on and there would be a gluten-free bun for my burger.' It was a fantasy," Nguyen says. "We wanted a place where women's sports were given the same visibility as men's."

The Sports Bra opened in 2022 and is widely credited as the first of its kind. This year, more than a dozen women's sports bars have opened their doors, meaning they now exist in 24 cities across the U.S. And there are more to come: The Sports Bra has franchises opening in Boston, Indianapolis, Las Vegas and St. Louis.

Nguyen says it's significant to see the public connect to women on TV. "Once you go into the Bra and see women's sports, it's very difficult to go into any space where there's a bunch of TVs and not notice when women's sports are absent," she says. Many of the athletes on screen are advocates for civil rights, the queer community, fair pay and equal representation. For fans to see their values echoed and celebrated by the athletes they admire is extremely meaningful. At its core, a women's sports bar is a space that honors those things.

"When I opened The Sports Bra, I opened something that was authentic and directly connected to the community that I knew and loved," Nguyen says. "That's the best part."

As for Petrone, the newly minted sports fan? "When women's sports are on TV, I root for both sides," she says. "Until I get those Fire tickets." □

CUBS SHORTSTOP Addison Russell, going into the front row to snag a foul ball in St. Louis in 2017, collided with a fan eating nachos. The chips, as chips do, fell where they may. "I got all nacho'd up," said Russell, who as a goodwill gesture between innings presented the fan with a fresh order. As he explained later: "You don't get in [between] a man and his nachos."

You don't. Lakers guard Magic Johnson reduced his body fat from 14% to 4% in a single offseason in large part by eliminating his favorite arena food. "I love nachos," he said at the time. "I'd have nachos five nights out of seven, at least."

Nachos are almost entirely a sports-created phenomenon. They were the invention of a *maître d'* at El Moderno restaurant in Piedras Negras, Mexico, across the Rio Grande from Eagle Pass, Texas. Though Ignacio "Nacho" Anaya first loosed them on his grateful patrons during World War II, they weren't mainstreamed in America until 1976, when the Rangers introduced them at Arlington Stadium. The club sold 250,000 orders that season, instantly eclipsing hot dog sales.

Fifty years later, they remain irresistible. "Isn't it strange that we're waiting in line to spend 30 f---ing dollars on nachos?" says a happily inebriated man in a vintage Jacob deGrom Mets jersey to the 20 strangers queued in front of him at the Goya stand down the third baseline on the Citi Field concourse. "Nachos, dude."

The nachos grande are actually \$17.89 plus tax, a price commensurate with the joy of eating them from a replica Mets batting helmet the size of a human head. Farther along the concourse, in the Citi Field memorabilia shop, a batting helmet worn by Mets second baseman Jeff "The Squirrel" McNeil in a game against the Brewers will set you back \$1,000. And it is not filled with chips, cheese, sour cream and shredded chicken.

Those of us who gorge on food and drink in Flushing Meadows divide our day between the restrooms and the field, between Flushing and Meadow. All these nachos grande and 32-ounce sodas have to go somewhere. Life's arc—we eat food, then we are food—is condensed into three hours. After 10 innings of gorging—the Mets won—the baseball fan is stadium food. We traverse the bowels of the stadium, egress through the aptly named vomitoria, then inch our way into the clogged artery of the Whitestone Expressway.

On the shotgun seat, an empty ice cream helmet sits inside the empty nacho helmet, like nesting dolls. There is a third, invisible hat in the car. It is a golden sombrero, awarded to Mets center fielder Tyrone Taylor, who struck out four times in four at-bats, every one of them heralded by his walk-up song, still resounding in my ears and infiltrating my own clogged arteries: "It Was a Good Day." □

PHOOD PHILLY



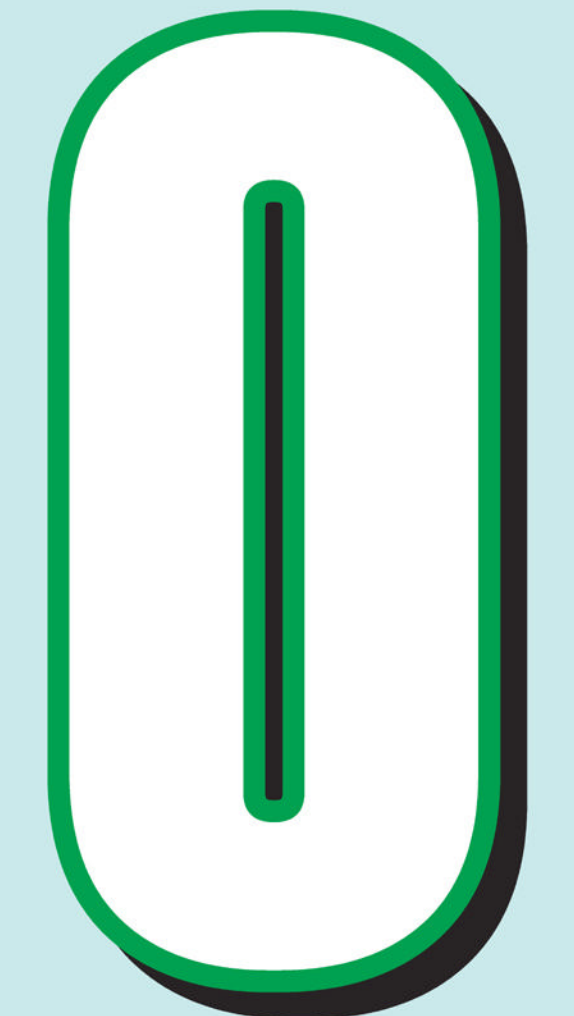


Bread makers? Skittles aficionados? The **PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES** run the gamut, illustrating the divide that's prevalent in sports between healthy eaters and junk food lovers

BY
STEPHANIE APSTEIN

PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY
EDDIE GUY





ON ANY given day in the Phillies' clubhouse, one of the more impressive juxtapositions in sports unfolds.

In one corner sits first baseman Bryce Harper, eating organic, pasture-raised beef from a local farm, cooked without seed oils, perhaps with a side of bread he made himself from flour from a small operation in Texas or raw milk from Lancaster, Pa. As a snack he might mash a banana with protein powder and cashew butter, or occasionally indulge in freeze-dried strawberries.

Across the room, ace Zack Wheeler is digging his pitching hand into a bucket of Popeye's fried chicken.

And then Harper, 32, will go 2-for-4 with a double and a walk and Wheeler, 35, will strike out 10 over seven scoreless innings.

Many teams boast good players. It's unlikely that anyone else juggles the range of dietary habits the Phillies do.

"You can't possibly have a bigger separation than we do," says catcher J.T. Realmuto.

It might seem indulgent to acquiesce to every player's request for his favorite food. How many of us were told

as children to eat what was in front of us? But health is the next frontier in sports, and although good nutrition cannot on its own prevent injuries, Phillies director of strength and conditioning/nutrition Morgan Gregory says, "If it can lower the risk of injuries that could be incurred from improper fueling, then the risk is much too large to take to not provide every resource possible." (Even if one of those resources is fried chicken for their ace.)

The rest of the roster resides somewhere on the scale of "Bryce to Zack," with some players covering the entire spectrum at once: "I've been on the raw milk, raw honey and all that, the ancestral liver and all that stuff," says lefty Jesús Luzardo. "But at the same time, after a game, every once in a while, I just gotta get McDonald's."

Luzardo and his teammates neatly sum up the dilemma facing the modern major leaguer: They recognize that their body is their livelihood, and what they stock it with matters. And also they like junk food.

THAT THEY are even having these conversations would have shocked their forerunners. Yankees legend Babe Ruth is said to have downed a dozen hot dogs between games of a doubleheader. Boog Powell told *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED* in 1996 that as the first baseman for the Orioles in the '60s and '70s, he would send a clubhouse attendant to buy him two sausages during games in Milwaukee, then demolish them between at-bats. Yankees lefty David Wells famously pitched a perfect game in '98 fueled by nothing but a hangover and a pancake.

Only in 2017 did the collective bargaining agreement require teams to have access to full-time chefs and dietitians, who quickly learned that corn syrup had become as much a part of the game as cans of corn. Clubs began swapping granola bars for chips and mixing in the occasional salad amid groans. But within a few years, something changed. In many clubhouses—such as Philadelphia's—the players were suddenly the ones asking for healthier choices.

Many of them trace their interest in food to the pandemic, when they passed the interminable days at home cooking for themselves. *Wait a minute*, they started to think. *What's in this?*

Around the same time, as they and the people around them became more active on social media, their algorithms fed them more startling information—some of it more accurate than others. ("I think a lot of diet talk is marketing," says reliever Matt Strahm. "So I don't even listen to it. Like, wasn't oat milk the biggest craze? And now [people say] it's cancerous.") And once they started clicking, they couldn't stop.

THIS PAGE: TERENCE LEWIS/CON SPORTSWIRE/BETTY IMAGES (PHANATTO); EMILIE CHINN/BETTY IMAGES (HARPER); THEO ANTONIO/CON SPORTSWIRE/BETTY IMAGES (PREVIOUS SPREAD); EMILIE CHINN/BETTY IMAGES (CASTELLANO); G. JUNE/BETTY IMAGES (WHEELER); THEO ANTONIO/CON SPORTSWIRE/BETTY IMAGES (WHEELER); BRENNAN ASH/LEWIS/BETTY IMAGES (LUZARDO)



THE VISITORS'
CHEESESTEAKS
ARE BIGGER
THAN THOSE IN
THE PHILLIES'
CLUBHOUSE.
[PRESUMABLY
CHEFS ARE TRYING
TO SLOW DOWN
OPPONENTS.]

"I just think we're more aware of it now than we were even three or four years ago," says Realmuto. "And more people are talking about it. We're realizing in America how much they're throwing in our foods to be able to stay longer on shelves. I really think we were kind of dumb to it years ago. We just didn't know how bad that stuff was."

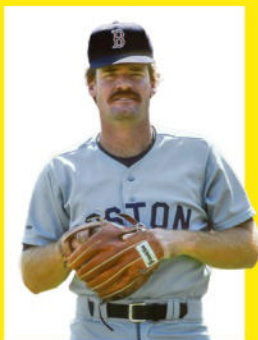
Harper had always tried to take care of his body—as the No. 1 overall pick at age 17, he envisioned a long career for himself—but he found his "eyes opened" when he started reading labels during the pandemic. And the products that seemed risky weren't always the ones he expected. "Walking through grocery stores, if you look at the back of a thing, it could be organic—and the ingredients are absolutely terrible," he says. "So there are just certain things that I look for: no seed oils, no preservatives, certain stuff like that, and I stick with the foods that I like to eat." Never one

to do something halfway, he decided he wanted to know where everything came from. And that meant everything.

“Detergent, sheets, home products, cleaning products,” he says. “We switched it all. If we can make it homemade, we want to make it homemade. If we can get it from [our home] garden, we get it from the garden.” When he cannot source an item himself, he looks for small producers who can explain their process to him. “He wants to know where that cow’s been,” jokes former Phillies reliever Jeff Hoffman, now with the Blue Jays. (The answer: Utah, which is whence Harper sources his beef.)

That was all fine at home—even Harper’s three children got on board once they learned that homemade macaroni and cheese is still delicious—but in-season, Harper eats most of his meals at work. So he approached the club’s head chef at the time, Keith Rudolf, about sourcing food. The team began stocking pasture-raised beef from Amish country, raw milk and Mountain Valley water in glass bottles. Harper says he received zero pushback about the cost: “[Owner] John [Middleton] and [GM] Dave [Dombrowski] are all about it if it’s gonna make us play better,” he says. On the road, Harper goes grocery shopping, hires private chefs or frequents restaurants whose ingredients he has vetted ahead of time.

RECIPES FOR SUCCESS



**WADE
BOGGS**

The Red Sox third baseman ate chicken before virtually every game in 1983 and won the batting title. He also claimed to have pounded 73 beers on one flight. This is not what nutritionists mean when they talk about a balanced diet.



**BRYSON
DeCHAMBEAU**

After gaining 50 pounds by inhaling protein shakes and having bacon and eggs for breakfast and steak and potatoes for dinner, the long hitter began to feel “weird.” In 2022 he dropped 20 pounds in a month by adopting the healthier Whole 30 diet.



**FRED
DRYER**

The Rams lineman and soon-to-be '80s TV action star avoided meat and bread. He ate two meals a day, starting with eight raw egg yolks, applesauce, papaya juice, milk and bran thrown in a blender, then steamed veggies at night.



**LOU
GEHRIG**

Two or three times a week, the Iron Horse and his mother would go fishing for eels [they once caught 86], which she would pickle and he would share with his Yankees teammates. “[Lou] would rather eat them than caviar,” she explained.

FROM LEFT: DAVID MADSON/GETTY IMAGES; JARREN CARROLL/LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY IMAGES; DANNY FARMER/REUTERS; PHOTOFEST; JAMES HAMILTON/REUTERS PHOTO ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

He stays away from preaching to his teammates, but he says they often come to him with questions. “A lot of guys are 80/20, which is great,” he says. “I do a terrible job of being 80/20. I’m as far in as I am.”

That doesn’t mean he never eats anything a layperson might recognize. Digging through his locker, he pulls out a bag of potato chips and reads the ingredients: “Potatoes, 100% organic grass-fed beef tallow, Redmond sea salt.”

As for the raw, or unpasteurized, milk, he understands it’s a delicate subject. The Centers for Disease Control and Food and Drug Administration both strongly advise against its consumption, and 18 states ban its sale.

(“While the perceived nutritional and health benefits of raw milk consumption have not been scientifically substantiated, the health risks are clear,” cautions the FDA, pointing to, among other conditions, the chances of contracting listeriosis and salmonellosis.) “There’s a lot of nutrients that are incredible—when it’s done right,” Harper says. “You have to understand you’re getting it from a small farm that does it right and processes it the right way. And what works for me might not work for some people. They think I’m crazy. That’s fine.”

He adds with a laugh, that every day his grandmother “smoked a 24-pack of Smokin Joe’s, no filter, and she lived until she was 95. So it just depends.”

Athletes have been making intriguing gastronomic choices for years

BY MARK BECHTEL



**ROCKY
MARCIANO**

The mid-century heavyweight ate predictable fare like lamb chops and soft-boiled eggs for breakfast. More interesting was his use of liquids: Rocky would rub his face with olive oil and rye whiskey twice a day to toughen it up.



**ED
HOCHULI**

The NFL’s most buff referee got that way with a weekly diet that had him eat sushi three times, chicken noodle soup three times and a big salad on the other day. It wasn’t all healthy, though: “I have Cheetos when I’m feeling sorry for myself.”



**MARTINA
NAVRATILOVA**

An early adopter of using a nutritionist, the tennis star followed the advice of Robert Haas, who preached low-protein, high-carb meals (pancakes for breakfast, spaghetti for dinner). He did have a cheat: a “chocolate fudge cake” with no chocolate.



**MICHAEL
PHELPS**

The breakfast from the 23-time Olympic gold medalist’s 10,000-calorie diet was amazing: three fried egg sammies (with cheese, fried onions and mayo), three chocolate chip pancakes, a five-egg omelet and French toast.

WE WOULD be remiss not to mention the cheesesteaks. This is Philadelphia, after all. Both the home and visitors' clubhouse kitchens make them, but it's the visitors' version that has become famous. Asked on the eve of the National League Division Series what he knew about the Citizens Bank Park atmosphere, Dodgers two-way star Shohei Ohtani said he knew the fans were passionate—and he knew the clubhouse cheesesteaks were “really good.” Indeed, seemingly everyone who comes through town tries one, and many of them try more than one. The three-game series record belongs to Rockies strength coach Mike Jasperson, who took down 21½ in 2022, then added another 3½ the next day to capture the four-game series crown as well. He gained nine pounds and the place of honor on the video board in the cafeteria. (The one-day record belongs to Adrián Sánchez, who ate 10½ as a utilityman for the Nationals in '21; the Mets combined for 103 in one day in 2014.)

But perhaps an even more telling tribute to the visitors' side sammies is that Phillies players indulge in them from time to time. Wheeler and Hoffman used to dispatch a clubhouse attendant to pick up an order, because they are bigger than the ones served in the home clubhouse. (Presumably the chefs are trying to slow down opponents.)

A cheesesteak before a game barely registers as indulgent for Wheeler, who astonishes teammates nearly as much by putting away food as he does by putting away hitters. “He eats a pack of Sour Skittles and then throws eight shutout,” says third baseman Alec Bohm.

But they are quick to clarify: His diet cracks them up, but it's not as bad as it looks. He has a private chef at home, and his wife, Dominique, keeps him under control.

“He only eats bad here,” says Strahm.

But does he ever. The array of sweets on display in his locker would make a dentist cringe. (It often has the same effect on his teammates. “I cut out candy for the most part,” says Luzardo. “Seeing that in his locker gives me, like, PTSD. I want to relapse—but I won't.” Outfielder Brandon Marsh agrees: “I can't go over there. I gotta turn the other way.”) Before a start at home, Wheeler says he tries to limit himself to “a smaller sandwich or a cup of rice,” but afterward, he feels he has earned whatever he wants. Usually that's a steak (at best) and fast food (at worst). And before a start on the road, away from Dominique's supervision, Wheeler heads straight for Jack in the Box or Panda Express. “Kind of whatever sounds good that day,” he explains. When he hit 10 years of service time in 2023, his teammates threw him a party catered by McDonald's. “They know what I like,” he said at the time.

Given that routine, Realmuto acknowledges, Wheeler might be the most impressive athletic specimen on the team.



THEN THERE'S everyone else, the ones who don't use the term “endocrine disruptors” or eat a handful of gummy worms on the way to the mound. For the most part, they cut out sugar and preservatives whenever possible. They have learned to cook or hired private chefs rather than turning to fast food. Sometimes that works better than others: “On the rare occasion I am cooking for myself, it's pretty barbaric,” acknowledges right fielder Nick Castellanos. “The one thing that I'll make over and over again is I'll do just, like, a case of ground beef. I'll make it in olive oil. I'll put some rosemary, salt, some garlic, and I'll just eat that in a bowl with a banana. I could have that every day for the rest of my life and be happy.” (“That sounds terrible,” says Wheeler.)

Bohm summarizes like this: “If it lived on the earth

LUKE HALES/GETTY IMAGES (HARPER); MITCHELL LEFF/GETTY IMAGES (HEADBAND)



**HARPER, WHO
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WILL SOAK HIS
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AND VINEGAR TO
REMOVE TRACE
PESTICIDES.**

or grew out of the earth, I'm probably O.K. eating it."

At first, many of them found the new routine hard to keep. But the results made it worth it.

"I could just feel I had more energy," says Realmuto. "I had more mental clarity. It was almost within days of doing it."

And with enough practice, they get used to it. "My taste buds have kind of changed," says Bohm. "I don't really crave sugar or whatever." Harper says that any time he misses a food, he recreates it using approved ingredients to scratch the itch. He made homemade cheesesteaks for the Super Bowl—bread from scratch, rib eye from the farm, onions and peppers and cheese from small producers—and pronounced them "absolute fire."

Indeed, sometimes watching what you ingest just

tastes good. Righty Aaron Nola is partial to an Australian water brand whose name he will not reveal for fear of creating a shortage. "It's [already] hard to get the water," he explains. "I like the water a lot."

Castellanos tries not to forget how unusual he and his peers are. "People that have resources, people that are rich, are able to do something about [food quality]," he says. "Because, unfortunately, unless you're just buying raw vegetables, eating clean is a delicacy. Hopefully it gets better, but I think you just have a lot of very health-conscious individuals that have money in this room, so they're able to do something about it."

Most of the players try to keep things in perspective. Glass bottles are good, but there's more to life than avoiding microplastics. Marsh says he drinks out of plastic to preserve the glass for his teammates who feel more strongly about it; he doesn't want to be the reason someone goes 0-for-4. And reliever Tanner Banks is skeptical that a beverage or two can have much impact anyway.

"You get significantly more microplastics from your clothing," he says, pointing at his polyester jersey.

Many of them are fathers, which means eliminating desserts entirely would not be a popular choice at home. Nola, a Louisianan, might be disinherited if he gave up king cake. "I was at my most strict at 25," says Castellanos. "It's funny—this is before I met Jess, my wife. When I was single, there's no comfort. Comfort is the enemy. Now I'm happily married, have a family; we want to go get ice cream or we're at a restaurant and we have dessert. I'm not G.I. Joe. I have some wiggle room. But I think I give myself that wiggle room because I stay active and 90% of it's clean."

He adds, "I feel like if you dig and dig and dig and dig, you're probably not gonna love what you find on everything. So I have a little bit of faith that if a major league organization is getting these ingredients from somewhere, it's probably O.K. I trust people to do their job. And I'm not afraid to pick up a garden hose and take a drink now and again, because it's probably good for my immune system."

Harper would probably eschew the hose. But a rumor circulates among his teammates about his behavior at Wheeler's party. The allegation is so out of character that it feels impossible. The man hasn't eaten fast food for the better part of a decade. He makes his own cheeses with cream and rennet. On the rare occasion that he hasn't grown the fruit or vegetable himself, or know the person who did, he soaks it in baking soda and vinegar to remove trace pesticides. Did Harper really permit himself a McDonald's French fry?

"I did eat it," he acknowledges with a grin. "It was great." □

NOT DISHING IT OUT

Former NFL quarterback Jesse Palmer's second act includes becoming of a baking expert. (Just don't ask him to bake)

WHEN HE was a quarterback at Florida, Jesse Palmer had a plan in case his dream of playing pro football didn't come to fruition. The Toronto native had a double major in marketing and political science (with a certificate in international relations). "If the NFL thing didn't work out, I was planning on being an ambassador," says Palmer. "I was hoping I'd get stationed in a country that had great food."

Palmer credits his mom's cooking for instilling his foodie ethos, which only got stronger during his five-year NFL career with the Giants and 49ers. "I got to play and live in probably the two best food cities in America," Palmer says. He's also a fan of travel, hitting France at least once a year. It's where he learned to love his favorite dessert, the classic *tarte tatin* (a sort of upside-down apple pie).

All of which is why Palmer's second act didn't involve diplomacy, but *crème diplomate*. As one of his many gigs these days—he's also the host of *The Bachelor* franchise and a color commentator for ESPN's college football coverage—Palmer, 47, hosts a variety of baking shows on the Food Network. (His ninth season of *Holiday Baking Championship* started on Nov. 3.)

His knowledge allows Palmer to speak intelligently with the judges about the desserts they taste. For instance, he and judge Duff Goldman have commiserated over the fact that no contestant—not even one with classical French training—has ever made a truly great *tarte tatin* on any show he's hosted. "It's the execution of crust generally that is not done very well," Palmer says. "Also, Duff calls it the goo factor—the goo factor is not right. The apples are sometimes too dry."

So yes, Palmer can talk all day about a *tarte tatin*, a *sablé* or a *mille-feuille* (and pronounce them all flawlessly, something he attributes to being in a French immersion program growing up in Canada). But he absolutely cannot make any of them.

"I've picked up quite a bit," he says. "I've just never

actually put it into execution. I have zero time and I'm on the road so often. I live in hotels. So unfortunately, I don't get a chance to sleep in places that have kitchens very often. But just through osmosis over the last, I don't know, 10 years almost, hopefully I've picked up a thing or two."

He's not exaggerating about his schedule. Speaking on a Monday in October (it was Canadian Thanksgiving, but he didn't have time for a big celebration), Palmer had been up since 4 a.m. watching film of Vanderbilt against Alabama and

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF FOOD NETWORK;
CHRIS SPAIN/THINK/GETTY IMAGES



BY MARK BECHTEL



South Carolina for the Commodores' game against LSU that he was calling with Joe Tessitore the following Saturday. Then it was on to studying the Tigers' defense. [He did have time to text Tessitore, a fellow foodie, about where they would eat in Nashville the night before the game. "That's like our number one priority," Palmer says. "We're worried about the game secondly."] Then it was off to Los Angeles the next day to host *The Golden Bachelor: Women Tell All* reunion show. Then back home for a day before going to Nashville for the game.

By that time, *Holiday Baking Championship* had already been filmed. "I think the secret sauce of the show is not even the baking," Palmer says. "It's the people's stories. And I think that's what draws so many viewers in at home is that you start relating to some of the people. You start rooting for some of the people based on their backgrounds, the more you learn about them." And getting contestants to open up is a big part of Palmer's job. "I'm sort of acting as a conduit behind the scenes," he says.

Among Palmer's other duties on the show: wear ridiculous outfits (sweaters that light up, for instance) and dole out a hearty serving of dad jokes—something he's gotten pretty good at now that he's an actual dad. Palmer married model Emely Fardo in 2020, and they have a daughter, Ella, who is nearly 2.

"As she gets older and older, I hope the kitchen is where we end up spending most of our time," he says. "Honestly, I know the living room is sort of the social gathering place, but I'd love to spend a lot of time in the kitchen with her."

Ella has already gotten a start, making muffins with her mom and helping out with breakfast. And unlike her dad, she's showing a real aptitude for baking. "Ella was cracking eggs—one-handed, might I say," he says. "Cracking the egg and then actually splitting it into the bowl. I know I was impressed." □



NATURE OF THE FEAST

Palmer (above, with Giants in 2003) has picked up knowledge from Goldman and the other judges "through osmosis."

FOOD

BY MARK BECHTEL

FOR

ILLUSTRATION BY
EDDIE GUY

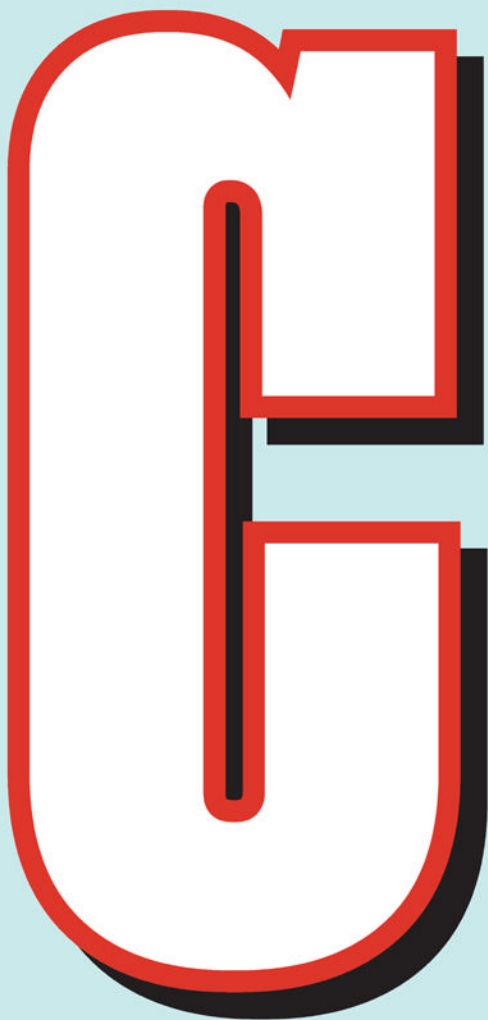
TROT

Beer, tacos, doughnuts—these gluttonous treats make any situation better.

That's why the running community has made **FOOD RACES**
a fun way to compete in anything from a one-miler to an ultramarathon







CHICAGO COUPLE Melanie Pozdol and Victor Hilitski really should have a meet-cute. She can drink four beers and run a mile in a little over six minutes. He once ate 19 samosas and ran 21 miles in a little over six hours. In a perfect world, they'd have crossed paths with each other jogging on the Loop while stuffing their faces with deep-dish pizza or something. But, no, they just met at a wedding.

The fact that they are part of the city's gastronomical racing community and never met before that day shows just how expansive that universe has become. And it's not just Chicago. Raleigh has a race that combines a five-mile run with a dozen Krispy Kremes. The Bay Area has an IPA 10K. Last year, runner and entrepreneur Simon Evers got the idea to stage a bakery half-marathon in Copenhagen when his company was putting out a magazine dedicated to 10 of the city's top bakeries. When he realized the total distance between them was 13.1 miles, he took it as a sign. ("It was written in the sky," he says.) This September, Evers brought the idea to Brooklyn;

FOOD AND SPORTS



he got 17,000 applications for 100 spots. The list goes on and on, and they all owe a debt of gratitude to France's 40-year-old Marathon du Medoc, during which runners sample wines, cheeses and oysters. (Yes, oysters.)

These events stand apart from, say, competitive hot dog eating in that they replace at least some of the gluttony with something that's actually good for the body. That was what Julie Knopp was thinking when she saw that Denver was hosting a 50K Taco Bell ultramarathon. She couldn't make it, so she decided to bring the idea to the Twin Cities, where she runs communications for a non-profit. "The reason I was initially interested in distance running was primarily the training and the accountability to train, rather than the event itself," says Knopp, who ran her first marathon—by herself—during the pandemic. "But I think this sort of race has made the event itself something shinier, something that I look forward to."

The rules are simple: Run 31.1 miles, stopping along the route at seven Taco Bells, where you must purchase and eat a food item, including at least one burrito and

COURTESY OF GRAY DUCK STUDIOS (2)



“SO MUCH OF THE TIME WE HAVE TO BE SO SERIOUS. AND THIS WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO BE ABSOLUTELY RIDICULOUS AND *JUST HAVE FUN*,” LASETER SAYS.



RUN MÁS

Knopp [opposite, left] brought a Taco Bell ultramarathon to the Twin Cities, where Super served a mascot of sorts.

one Crunchwrap. (This would be an interesting place to point out that Knopp is vegan. With its ample beans and veggies, she says, “Taco Bell is super customizable.”)

Knopp wasn’t really plugged into the Twin Cities running community, so she just posted the idea on a few Facebook groups. She got so many entries—more than 50—that she had to cap the field and cede some of the administrative work to her friend Sarah Super, who encouraged runners on race day while dressed as a taco. Knopp mapped out the course herself, then ran it in segments and rode it on her bike to make sure it was tenable. The response was overwhelming. A major Taco Bell franchisee reached out about partnering next year, even though Knopp didn’t ask the restaurants for

permission because she was afraid they’d say no. It’s the same reason she didn’t apply for any permits. “This whole thing was rogue,” she says.

A similar ethos inspired Craig Woods to start the Samosa Stumble in 2022. “I come from the DIY, punk rock community world,” says the 43-year-old who works at Northwestern and plays in a band called The Feat. “I grew up going to concerts in YMCA basements and church basements.”

He and a friend both live in Chicago’s Little India neighborhood and became obsessed with the samosas at a restaurant called Oberoi’s. (“They’re gigantic,” Woods says. “Not your typical tiny samosa.”) Woods got into ultramarathons during the pandemic and, inspired by the bizarrely cruel endurance races staged by course designer Lazarus Lake, decided to come up with his own challenge: Eat a samosa and run a 1.1-mile loop every 20 minutes until you drop out. Most of the competitors—there were just north of 50 this year—came from his Rogers Park Running Club. “The first couple of rounds, people are excited and happy and it’s fun,” he says. “People are like, *This is cool*. And then it gets real sick and gross after a while. I was taking that mindset of making something just fun, but super ridiculous.” One four-time quitter confessed to trying to increase her appetite with pot, but it turns out marijuana is not, at least in this case, a performance-enhancing drug.

The 2023 race was legendary. Hilitski downed 19 samosas and still finished second. “I stopped eating when I definitely reached the limit of having fun and just not finding a reasonable explanation in my mind why I’m doing this,” he says. (It didn’t help that the Ironman vet had gone for a 50-mile bike ride that morning.)

Woods didn’t compete in that race. He took part in the first one, stopping at six, but now he serves as a referee/hype man. Wearing a striped shirt, he taunts his runners, offering them cash to quit and singing Boyz II Men’s “It’s So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday” to each one who drops out. (Not very punk, Craig.) He was once accused of serving spicier samosas later in the Stumble, a charge he neither confirms nor denies.

Knopp is gentler toward her competitors, probably because she was so moved that so many strangers—including one who came from Alaska just to take part—fulfilled her dream. “I think in many ways it’s a kind of a tough time to be alive for a lot of people right now,” Knopp says. “Many of us spend a lot of time on our phones or somewhat isolated. I think we want more joyful experiences. And there’s a sense of community that you can find in these runs that is kind of scarce these days. There’s an instant bond you can get when you show up to a 50K fueled by Taco Bell with 50 strangers.”

TRAINING FOR a food race is not easy. Knopp says the key is getting used to eating while running, so she'd often heat up a frozen burrito and take it on a run with her. Past that, you're basically trying to keep the food down while maintaining your pace.

On the other hand, there's the competitive beer mile. (Drink a beer, run a quarter mile and repeat three times.) It's much more fast-paced—the men's world record is 4:27.10—so the margins are tighter. That means every detail must be minded, beginning with the choice of beer. The rules specify an ABV of at least 5% in a 12-ounce bottle. (That caused a problem at the 2025 Beer Mile



SPORTY SPICE

Woods (left, in cap) has geared the Samosa Stumble to be a fun local event, while Pozdol and Laseter (below, left to right) compete internationally in the Beer Mile World Classic.



World Classic in Portugal, where most beers come in slightly smaller bottles. One member of the U.S. team had to check a dozen cases of beer in their luggage.) “You don’t want anything super flavorful, like an IPA,” says the best women’s beer miler in the world, Elizabeth Laseter. “I like Bud Light Platinum a lot, because it comes in a bottle with a twist-off cap, and that’s really easy and efficient if you’re just trying to drink it as quickly as possible.”

Laseter got her start as a freshman at Johns Hopkins, where she ran cross country and track. After the season she was introduced to her first beer mile, which her teammates held at 10 p.m. on an isolated track. (Beer milers can go rogue, too.) It was a needed change of pace. “I had kind of a tough time with college training, just because it was pretty intense for me,” she says. “So much of the time we have to be so serious. And this was an opportunity to be absolutely ridiculous and just have fun and act like total idiots.”

Laseter ran 7:37, almost beating all the men, and started thinking, *There might be a future in this.* And there has been. She’s won three Beer Mile World Classics in a row, most recently with a time of 5:56. Her three-peat came on the heels of Pozdol’s 2022 title.

Unlike Laseter, Pozdol is a relatively slow runner, so she makes up her time in the chug zone, where she can put away a bottle in about six seconds. “She’s the best chugger in the world,” says Laseter. There are a couple of reasons for this:

- **Training regimen.** For obvious reasons, beer milers can’t train with real beer. Some prefer non-alcoholic alternatives, but both Pozdol and Laseter swear by Topo Chico seltzer, which they say is harder to get down than a brew. “The discomfort of chugging a Topo Chico is horrible,” says Pozdol.

- **Science.** Pozdol spent plenty of time filling up beer bottles with water and then pouring them into a sink at various angles to find the ideal tilt. (She says it’s around 45 degrees.)

- **The oboe.** Yes, the oboe. Pozdol used to play it professionally. “Playing the oboe requires a lot of breath control, and that breath control from the oboe very much translates to breath control in chugging,” she says.

A good old competitive spirit also comes in handy. Pozdol, who has also competed in a pizza mile, once entered a burger-eating competition when she lived in Montana. “I was the only female participating,” she says, “and so people were like, ‘She’s not going to finish.’ And so I was like, ‘I’ll show you.’” In 2019 Pozdol won a corn-eating competition outside of Chicago by putting away five and a half ears in two minutes. She now dreams about a competition she would almost certainly win by default: “My true goal is to do a corn on the cob mile.” □

HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

INSPIRATION
FOR EVERYONE
ON YOUR LIST

CHAMPION

THE POWERBLEND HOODIE



Champion's legacy of authentic athletic wear shines through in this men's hoodie, blending classic style with everyday comfort. Crafted from soft, midweight fleece, it offers warmth without the bulk, making it an easy go-to layer. The double-lined hood and handy front pocket add practical touches, while the embroidered C logo and signature patch reflect Champion's iconic heritage, delivering a timeless look that's built for life on the move.

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POINT AFTER

GOOD AS IT GETS

AFTER THE Aces won their first WNBA title, in 2022, Finals MVP Chelsea Gray steered the conversation toward teammate A'ja Wilson, who had led all players in the series in scoring and tied for the lead in rebounds. Gray said that Wilson, then only 26, was “absolutely” in the women’s hoops GOAT conversation: “It should already be starting to be talked about.”

Three years later, the conversation is already over. In October, Wilson led Las Vegas to a third title in four seasons, picking up her second Finals MVP in a sweep of the Mercury. This after leading the league in scoring and winning a record fourth league MVP and a third Defensive Player of the Year award. If the WNBA is in its golden era—and it definitely is—Wilson’s greatness is undisputed across all generations. “You have your Mount Rushmore, she’s alone on Everest,” Aces coach Becky Hammon said. “There’s no one around.”





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**THE COMPETITION
WILL BE TENSE.**

(BUT AT LEAST THEIR FEET WILL BE COMFY)



ESPN



DEC 4TH & 5TH - ESPN 12-4PM ET | DEC 7TH - ABC 1-5PM ET



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